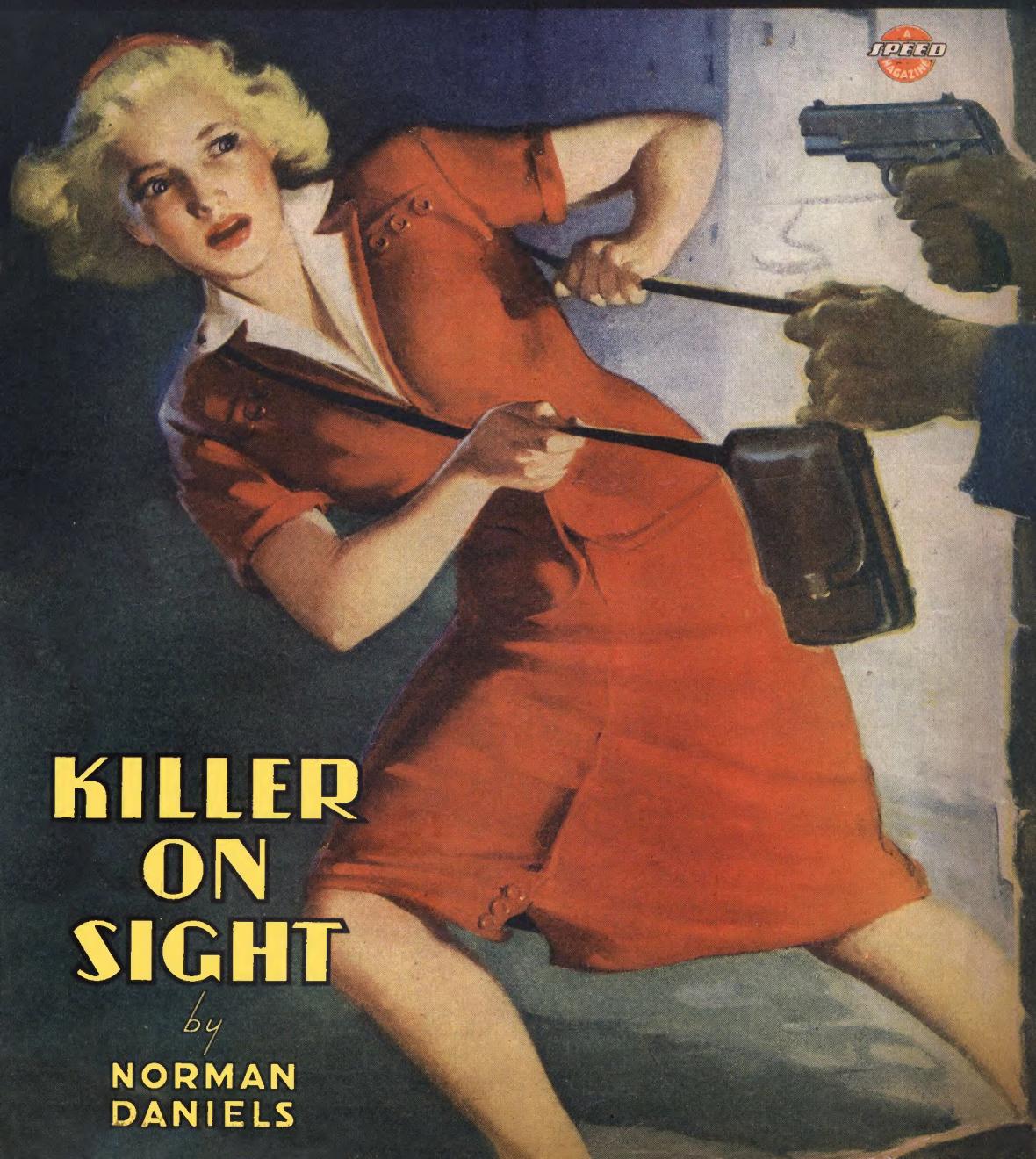


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by

NORMAN DANIELS



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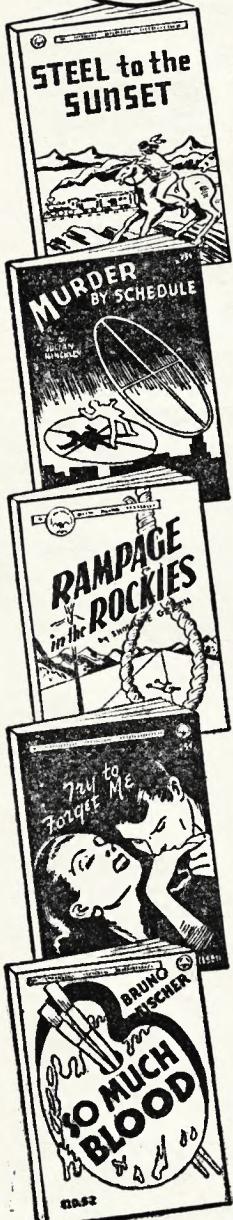
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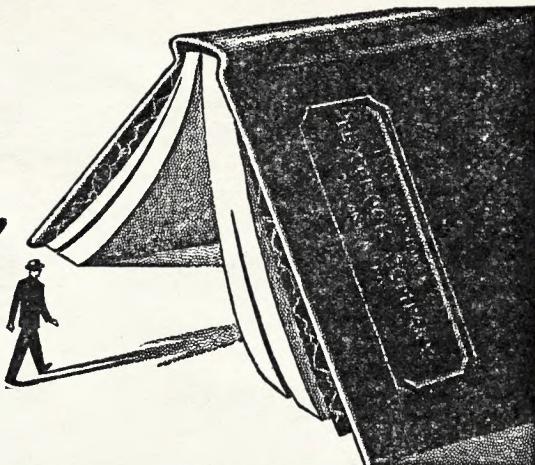
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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES

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No. 3

February
1948



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M. R. BINDAMIN, *Editor*

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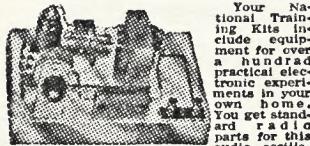
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KILLER ON SIGHT

By NORMAN DANIELS

I HANDED my hat to the checkroom girl, nodded to a bowing headwaiter and let him lead me to a table for one, way back near the little boy's room. I only slipped him two bucks and that was a two-buck table. It served, though, because I had no intentions of staying there very long. The girl I wanted to see would be ringside or nothing at all.

I looked around the lush place.

In the pale blue light everybody appeared glamorous. The orchestra was brassy and reminded me of a machine room and I wished the damned tooting would stop. I knew it wouldn't, any more than would the wheels and dice cubes being manipulated on the second floor of this institution.

Most gambling joints have a front which

is considered a necessary expense. Gus Hanna had a front too, only his paid off. The night club was run honestly. So were his games, from what I'd heard.

I ordered a drink, took a folded studio picture out of my pocket and glanced at it again.

It was the kind of a picture you could look at by the hour. *Esquire* didn't print 'em any better. The girl in the shot showed only her shoulders, neck and head, but if the rest of her went with the upper part, she'd be a nifty.

Spotting her was easy.

She sat at a table way down front with a skinny little guy whom I recognized as a torpedo, without half trying. I'd expected



Jim Talbot's simple job was to induce a certain wayward young lady that she would be welcomed back into the family fold, but for some highly mysterious reason someone shattered that possibility with the crack of a gun—and Mr. Talbot found himself courted by some low-brow torpedoes with murderous intent

that. The girl wore a creamy-colored gown that started about six or eight inches below the neckline, and something utterly invisible held it up.

I arose casually, squeezed through the

crowd on the dance floor; they were packed so closely that I sweated as much as the dancers by the time I reached her table.

She looked up at me with those great big violet eyes. The guy with her was a night-



I landed on him just before he started, but I pulled my punch a little because I wasn't sore.

Illustrated by William Meilink

mare. He held a cigarette between two stained fingers and his other hand lay flat on the edge of the table, with the fingers outspread. I knew the pose. He could go for the gun under his armpit in a flash.

"Mind if I sit down?" I asked.

"Scram," the skinny guy said.

"Please do sit down." The girl smiled at me. "Don't pay any attention to Joe here. He was delivered by a grouch."

The little guy scowled. "Now listen, Marietta, you know what Gus said."

"Who cares. I like six-feet-two men." She let her smile spread. "Sit down, good-looking, and buy me a drink."

I sat down but I wasn't buying. I said, "You're Marietta Atterbury and I'm here to take you home to daddy. You can walk out with me or you can travel tucked under my arm. Either way suits me—especially the last one."

She wasn't pleased by the prospects. "A private eye," she mused. "I wondered how long Dad would wait before he hired a mug to come after me. I'm not going, handsome. I still want that drink."

I called a waiter and ordered two scotches. The skinny lad wasn't getting any drink on my dough. The slur made him more sore. He leaned back and began looking around the place. I bent toward him.

"If you're looking for help, it won't do you any good, because I'll smear you first. I've never liked punks."

He turned a beet red and that hand on the edge of the table moved to caress the lapel of his tuxedo. He was sleek all right, and deadly as they come if he got the upper hand. It was up to me to see that he didn't.

THE drinks were delivered and I raised my glass to hers. "Here's all the good things, baby. The good things your father can buy you and that ought to be enough, seeing he's worth a few million bucks."

"To you, handsome, and I hope they don't flatten your face too much."

I took the drink, sighed and lit a cigarette. So it was going to be like that. I said, "Marietta, you're twenty years old. You've got yourself mixed up with a lot of bums like this crumb sitting with us. That's not for you, baby. You're class."

She spoke over the rim of her glass. "Ever meet Gus Hanna, good-looking?"

I never had the pleasure and I told her so. Though I knew a little something about Hanna and he'd been pointed out to me. He was more or less a mysterious figure without a police record. A gambler, but the kind that bankers talk to with pleasure and who gets himself invited to some surprisingly fancy affairs.

"Until you've met Gus, you don't know what class is," she told me. "I'm going to marry him."

"Over my dead body," I derided softly.

The punk thought it was about time he began earning his keep. He said, "Yeah, over your dead body it'll be a pleasure. I told you to scram. Get going. We don't like any sort of a shamus in here."

"And who cares what you like or don't like?" I asked mildly.

I turned my attention back to the girl. "Marrying Gus Hanna is all out of line. He's a gambler—okay, an honest one, let's admit, but not in your bracket. Your father is worth a lot of money. He's important. You come of a good family. Mixing the blood with the kind of stuff that runs in Hanna's veins—"

Her smile faded the moment I started on this angle and pretty soon she was frowning. That changed too, and became a scowl. I got the idea this girl could hate like poison when she wanted to.

She stuck a crimson-tipped finger toward her mouth and nervously bit at some loose polish. She tore a jagged hunk of it off. Then she jumped up.

"I'm too good for him, am I? Who are you to judge that? Too good—listen, you—you—"

"Jim Talbot is the name, baby," I said softly, and thereby made a bad mistake.

"I don't give a damn what your name is. Hanna is ten times better than I'll ever hope to be. If his blood is red, mine is black. Do you hear me? Why do you think I'm like I am? Because of a family background? Sonny, you've got a lot to learn about Marietta but the time isn't now."

She pushed her chair aside and stalked away. I started to get up, and fish-eye shoved a gun at me under the protection of the table. I sat down again.

"The lady," he said, "wants to be alone. Why don't you take a walk down some nice dark pier and forget to stop at the end of it?"

"You're getting me sore," I told him and

meant it. If Marietta got clear now, I'd probably never find her until she was Mrs. Gus Hanna, and even a guy like Carlyle Atterbury couldn't do much about that.

THE skinny guy nodded affably at someone sitting at a table not far away. He said, very gayly, "He's getting sore. My pal don't like me any more."

My hands were under the table now. The skinny guy was also short and his chin was nice and close to the edge of the table. I didn't tip the table until after I'd snapped his end up and caught him under the chin. Then I tossed the whole thing on top of him. He was frantically trying to bring his gun into play.

I bent down, measured him, and drove home a nice punch. He stopped trying to lift the gun. I kicked it out of his hand. The dancing had stopped now. Three or four waiters were advancing as if they meant it. A headwaiter was waving a stack of menu cards. This was no place for me.

I threaded between tables and reached the rear door through which I'd seen Marietta depart. I beat the boys there easily and the door had a lock on the outside. I jammed that home, turned and found myself facing a narrow, well-lighted and carpeted stairway. This, I reasoned, led to Gus Hanna's private quarters.

That was for me and I started up the stairs. I'd taken no more than two or three when I heard a pair of shots muffled through some door. I stopped in my tracks.

Maybe two or three minutes went by. Then a door opened and I heard running feet. I saw a pair of legs coming down the stairs so fast that I moved aside before I was bowled over backward. The man who came running down, three steps at a time, was about twenty-one. He looked well in a tuxedo, except for his paper-white face. He gave me one harrowed glance and didn't stop.

Before I could do anything about it, he was at the bottom and running along a corridor which led to an alley outside. He went through the door very, very fast. Then, as if the sound pursued him, I heard a couple of more shots.

I started up the stairs. Things were going to pop fast. All I wanted was Marietta and I meant to take her out of here if I had to smack her cold.

At the head of the stairs I hesitated because there were four doors and all of them closed. I could smell the gun smoke.

I tried the first door and found it locked. I went to work on the second with no more luck. I got the third one open but I didn't go inside.

Somebody stepped up behind me. A very cool voice said, "What's the idea, friend?"

I glanced over my shoulder. It was Gus Hanna in evening clothes. I said, "You'd better ask the man who did that."

I stepped aside and pointed into the room. Marietta lay on the floor. She'd been shot through the face—twice, I guessed—mainly because I'd heard two shots. You could never tell from a superficial look at her face now. In fact you'd have a hard time identifying her except for the clothes—and the figure.

GUS HANNA put a hand into the small of my back and I went catapulting into the room. He followed me and closed the door and locked it. His hands patted my hips and my sides, looking for a gun I didn't have. Then he faced me.

"Okay—let's have it."

I drew a long breath. "My name is Jim Talbot. I'm a private eye."

"Did you kill Marietta?" he asked softly.

"Did you?" I came back at him.

He shook his head slowly. "No!" His voice was acid.

I gave it to him cold. "I came here to bring Marietta back into the family fold. Yes, hired as a private eye by her father. She looped out on me, and one of your little punks kept me from following her."

"Who did it?" Hanna asked. "Don't tell me you don't know. You were in the corridor. I thought I heard a couple of shots and you couldn't have been far away when they went off."

I saw no reason to hold back. I said, "Hanna, this is straight. I was at the bottom of the stairs when the gun went off. Right afterward a young squirt came plunging down the steps. I never saw him before. He looked like he belonged here. Tux and all."

"How tall, how heavy? Give me something to go by."

"He passed me like the Twentieth Century passes a slow freight. This is rough but he looked about twenty-one or so. Five-

feet-eight, a hundred and forty, maybe. Dark hair. I never saw his eyes."

Hanna's fingers turned into tight fists. "Chapin. Harry Chapin. He dropped more dough than he had and they sent him to my office. They phoned me he was coming, so he could have been prowling around here."

"You got me there," I told him. "And if you don't mind, the air is getting stuffy in this place."

Hanna took my arm and piloted me out of the room. "Okay, I've heard only good things about you. Come back to see me when things clear up. You understand?"

I understood that if I didn't, four or five torpedoes would come courting me—with guns and saps. I nodded and shook hands with him. Then I went down the steps a shade less slowly than Harry Chapin had taken them. Which meant I did a mere sixty miles an hour. I went through the same door he did and found myself in a dismal, narrow alley, so dark I had to stop and accustom my eyes to the gloom.

Gradually I saw the end of the alley and the faint glow from the street. That was for me and I started moving as fast as I could travel. I never saw the man at all. Not until my foot hit him and I went sprawling. Then I discovered I was snuggled next to a corpse—and he was dressed in a blue uniform.

There was a gun lying beside him. Not a regular police .38, but a shiny pearl-handled pistol. I didn't touch it. I got up, more convinced than ever that about fifty miles of space between me and this alley would be the healthiest thing on earth.

CHAPTER II

"Brother to Trouble"

I WENT by taxi to Carlyle Atterbury's home. It was one of those lush places on Long Island with a parade grounds for a front lawn. As my client, he was entitled to an explanation, but I'd hoped the news might have reached him before I did. It hadn't and that made my job tougher. We sat down in his study.

"I thought you'd have her with you, Talbot," he said. "What happened? Or aren't you living up to your reputation of a private eye who gets what he goes after?"

I gave it to him bluntly. Nothing that

had happened had been my fault and he agreed to that after he got over the initial shock.

"You say Harry Chapin shot her. I don't understand. I thought it was Gus Hanna she played around with."

I shrugged. "Marietta liked to play the field, sir. I don't understand all the ins and outs but they may know at Headquarters. I suggest you go there. There is nothing more I can do."

"There is," he said curtly. "You can bring in this Harry Chapin! Marietta was my daughter. Maybe she wasn't much of a daughter but you couldn't expect more. Not with a mother like she had!"

He bent his head and kicked at the rug. I didn't say anything, for at a time like this, when a man is opening his heart because he must talk, it's better to remain silent.

He went on, speaking in an undertone. "I didn't have much when I was younger. I met Marietta's mother. What if she had been the village sweetheart! I loved her and I thought I could make her over. She lived with me for five years, bore Marietta and then lit out one night with somebody new. I found out she'd never changed. She was playing the field while living with me. That's why I don't blame Marietta. She couldn't help it. Blood tells, Talbot. Blood tells."

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely. "I wish there was something more constructive I could do. But my part is finished. I'm not needed to track down Chapin. The cops will do that—and Gus Hanna's men. He won't go to the chair, sir. They'll kill him on sight."

"That's the best way," Atterbury said slowly. He reached for my hand and tucked something into the palm of it. Then he got up and walked rapidly out of the room.

I glanced at the five bills in my fist. They were all hundreds. I walked out of the house, down the drive to the street and had a jittery few seconds when a shiny sedan pulled up to the curb. Gus Hanna was behind the wheel. I got in.

He said, "You told me you were seeing Atterbury so I came out to pick you up."

"Thanks," I said, and wondered what was coming next.

"How'd you like to go to work for me?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nix. But I might

keep your interests at heart if I stumble onto something."

"Yes, I hear you stumble very well indeed. I'm levelling, Talbot, because I have to. There's a lot more to this than you think. How much do you know?"

"That Marietta ran away to be with you. That she was going to marry you. But I don't believe it."

"You can start right now. I was going to marry her. She was a nice kid, Talbot. A little wild but she could be tamed. Now she's dead and I'm going to get the guy who killed her."

"Meaning Harry Chapin?"

"Who else? It has to be him."

I NODDED. "I guess so. He didn't have a gun when he passed me but he had pockets. Tuxedos do have pockets, don't they? It's so long since I wore one. . . ."

"Stop clowning. Chapin shot Marietta for a damned good reason. He was running for it when he met that cop who'd been checking the alley. Chapin let him have it because there wasn't anything else to do. Want to know why he killed Marietta?"

"Well, having been next door to an eyewitness, I'm naturally interested, Hanna. Sure I want to know."

"Chapin was spying on me. Spying on every gambler in town. There's an organization set to move in and take over every joint including mine. If we don't play ball, we're out of business. We've tried to find out who is behind it and gotten nowhere. Chapin knows. He worked for the man."

"But why Marietta?" I asked.

"Because I told her to play around with him and find out what he knew. She was breaking him down but Chapin must have tumbled. Maybe he told her too much. She wasn't killed because Chapin hated her. He was pathetically nuts about her. Now she's dead and I'm sending every boy I know to hunt down Chapin and shoot him on sight. The cops are sore too and the orders are to cut him down. Chapin won't get out of this but I'd like a lead to the man he worked for."

"If I get anything, I'll call," I promised.

At ten o'clock he dropped me at my office. I went in, sat down at my desk and smoked a cigarette with my eyes closed while I mused over the whole thing.

I remembered what that kid had looked like as he fled down the steps. Scared through and through. Too scared. Sure, a man becomes panicky after he commits a murder but it usually doesn't show itself as stark fear, and that's what young Chapin had showed. I tried to remember if I heard a door close upstairs just before he came diving down at me. I thought I had but that didn't mean very much. I knew it was possible for anybody to leave the upstairs hallway by using another door which led to the gambling rooms. That was the route Chapin had used to enter. Why didn't he take it going out? The alley was just as handy.

I damned myself for these doubts. Of course, the kid did it. With plenty of reason, too, according to Hanna. But it was none of my business any more. I'd been paid off, and sticking out my neck was foolish. I firmly made up my mind to forget the whole thing. To go to bed where I belonged and behave myself like a nice citizen.

So at midnight I rang the bell of Harry Chapin's home. I wasn't waking anybody up. The cops had taken care of that. A gray-haired, motherly-looking woman let me in. She said she was Harry's mother.

It was a fairly big house, indicating moderate wealth in a respectably quiet way. I followed Mrs. Chapin into the living-room where a rather old man sat in a wheelchair. His face was screwed up in the deepest lines of sorrow.

"My name is Talbot," I said. "I'm a private detective. I saw Harry tonight, right after the killing of that girl. I'm not satisfied that he really did kill her."

The old man's wrinkles faded a little. I'm glad that someone believes in my son. Harry is not a murderer. I'll stake what's left of my life on that."

HE WASN'T giving much away, I reasoned, if he flunked on that stake. The man was very close to death. I sat down. "Tell me about Harry. Everything! I'm going to try and help. First of all, did the police find any of his fingerprints around the house?"

"Yes. Plenty of them, and they compared with those on the gun. Although that wasn't necessary. The gun happened to be mine. Harry must have taken it with him when he went out tonight."

"Who was Harry working for?" I asked.

"Me. No one else, so far as I knew. My line is high-class art. He managed my place of business for me. I operated by remote control. I can't walk."

"What makes you think Harry didn't kill her—and the cop?"

I wished I hadn't said that and I wished Mrs. Chapin would stop looking at me that way.

"Because Harry wasn't the type. It takes a certain personality to become a killer," Mr. Chapin said firmly. "Harry had all the money he wanted, an excellent future and a nice girl we hoped he'd soon marry."

"He was playing around with Marietta," I reminded him and again wished I'd kept my big mouth shut. That statement hurt them.

"I do not believe it. He may have seen her, been out with her. If so, he had a very good reason. But—as you term it—play around with her? Definitely not. I tell you he was in love with Grace Perry."

Mrs. Chapin stopped dabbing at her eyes. She's been staring through the living-room door, across the hall and apparently out of a dining-room window. I heard someone cross the porch of the house next door. She arose and went to the front porch. She looked more depressed than ever when she returned.

"Someone came on the Perry's porch and I thought—I hoped—it might have been Harry. It was just a mailman."

I got up quickly. "There are a couple of angles to cover right away," I said. "I'll be back later."

Mrs. Chapin made a feeble protest at my precipitated departure but I wasn't going to be stopped. A mailman at the Perry house next door meant one thing to me.

It was midnight and he must be a Special Delivery messenger. Maybe that meant a letter for Grace Perry. From Harry Chapin.

I was between the Chapin house and the larger Perry mansion within two or three minutes after the messenger had departed. I saw a light go on upstairs and then a girl stepped before the window for a second. She had an envelope in her hand as she pulled the shade all the way down.

I fumbled around and found some small stones. I tossed them to clatter against the window. Instantly the shade went up

and so did the window. The girl leaned out. I cupped a hand to my mouth.

"Come down the back way," I whispered hoarsely. "I'll be waiting."

IT WAS probably the dirtiest trick of my checkered career during which I'd pulled a lot of dirty tricks. She still had the envelope when she came out of the back door. I stepped up behind her and snatched the letter.

There was a faint light from the kitchen windows and she saw at once that I wasn't Harry. She flew at me, banging small fists against my chest and calling me a lot of names that weren't too far from the kind of words Marietta would have used.

I caught her wrists and held her tightly to quiet her down. "Listen to me, Grace. I'm no cop. I'm a friend of Harry's—and of you. I know this letter is from him. I've got to read it and I'm going to, whether you like it or not."

I let go and her fists started in again. I fished matches out of my pocket and lit one. I held the corner of the envelope close to the flame.

"What's it going to be—a second-hand reading for you or nothing?"

She stepped back. "You win, but I'll bet you had childhood fun by burning your grandmother with a hot poker."

I shook my head. "These are modern times. I used an electric iron. Now shut up a minute."

I opened the envelope, lit more matches and read a letter that made me want to curse and bawl alternately. Harry had apparently written it while he was on the wing. There wasn't much to the letter and the writing was shaky.

Darling Grace—Believe nothing you hear. I killed no one. I'm going to the one man who can help me prove this. Have faith and keep your love warm for me.

I handed it to her silently. She read it with the help of my matches and then she laid a small head against my chest and cried it out. I dimly saw a bench at the rear of the place and led her there.

We talked in whispers. "There's one thing I want you to understand, Grace. I'm your friend and Harry's. I put the finger on him before I knew what it was all about. Harry doesn't even know me, except as an image he passed by in an awful rush.

But I set the cops and some dangerous mugs after him. If he so much as sticks his nose out of the door, he'll be killed. I'm die every day that he remains in hiding. Because it's my fault."

"What are you going to do?" she asked me naively. I wished I was that young again.

I put my arm around her. In a fatherly sort of way. Or you might call it brotherly. All I knew was that I liked the warmth of her, the perfume of her hair and the instinctive faith she placed in me even now, when she had every right to suspect I was a heel.

"Honey, I don't know. Harry is holed up somewhere. He'll soon find out, by radio and newspapers, that he is wanted for a double kill. He may decide to come out and face it, especially if he is innocent. Should he do that, he'll have no more chance than a tired old bull in a Spanish arena. Two elements are gunning for him. Hanna's men because they have orders. The cops because they don't want him brought to trial. He killed one of their kind. They want him dead and they'll take no chances on money and family getting him a soft rap. That's why you must tell me where he is, if you know."

"But I don't." She sobbed quietly. "I swear I don't. Harry never mentioned anyone he'd trust as much as he must trust this man—" Her voice cracked "or woman — The police said the dead girl was his—his sweetheart."

"Don't you believe it," I told her and wondered why I didn't believe it. "In the first place, Marietta came of a wealthy family too. And she was going to marry Hanna. She told me so."

That gave her some measure of relief.

I led her back to the house. In the light I saw that she was a pretty little thing with the bluest eyes in the world. Put her alongside a girl like Marietta and you'd hardly notice her because of Marietta's flamboyant type, but let a man see those two apart and he'd go for Grace every time.

"I'm taking the letter to destroy it," I said. "You'd get into trouble if the police found it. Should Harry contact you, let me know. My name is Jim Talbot and I'm in the phone directory under private detectives."

I let her go and walked around her house so the Chapins wouldn't see me. When I

"You'd better ask the man who did that," I said, pointing to her.



hit the sidewalk, I saw a man emerge from the shadows of some high hedging and streak for a car parked down the block. There was a driver in it and the car was moving as he got in.

I CURSED bitterly. Hanna was having me tailed and I'd never tumbled. Now he'd know damned well I was on Chapin's side and Hanna wouldn't like that. My prospects didn't look so good.

I decided to call it a night and went home to my hotel.

I showered, put on pajamas and came

out of the bathroom to find I had visitors. Two of them. One was Gus Hanna, the other that skinny squirt named Joe who'd sat at the same table with Marietta and me.

I said, "Keep that skinny boy away from me. It's his fault I didn't bring Marietta home alive."

"I'll slit his lousy throat," Joe declared conversationally and he meant me.

Hanna shrugged. He said, "Talbot, where is Chapin holed up? How much to talk? A grand? Two grand?"

"I'm sick of this," I told him. "Beat it and let me go to sleep."

Hanna wasn't buying. He twisted a straight-backed chair around and put a foot on it. Nobody respected my furniture.

He said, "You visited Chapin's family tonight. I think you also went to see his girl friend next door. What did you find out?"

"The girl friend is cute. His parents are old."

Hanna said, "Joe, take him apart a little."

JOE came at me with a speed that only personal pique could arouse. Before I knew what happened, he slugged me with the butt of a gun. I fell back but I bounded up. Joe tried to reverse the gun but I moved too fast for that. I rapped the gun out of his grip with the side of my hand. It paralyzed his whole arm. I crouched a little and brought up a roundhouse that lifted him off the floor. He hit the door and nearly went through it. After that he just curled up on the floor and stayed there.

When I faced Hanna, I also faced a gun and you couldn't take Hanna that way. I sat down again.

I said, "Joe had that coming."

"It won't hurt him any," Hanna said. "Wouldn't care much if it did. How'd you like a bullet through the middle, Talbot?"

"I'd prefer it to any more questions. I don't know where Chapin is. If I did, I'd get him out of there and to a place that's really safe."

"Why?"

"He didn't kill Marietta or the cop. Is that reason enough?"

"You were the one who put the finger on him, Talbot."

"A man is entitled to be a fool once in

his life. But only once, Hanna. I've smartened up."

"He killed her," Hanna said. "He was surveying all the gambling places. Getting a line on things for the man who intends to take us over. Marietta was a counter-spy, working for me. She learned too much. Chapin knew it and rubbed her out. If that isn't enough—I happened to have been in love with Marietta. Now do you think I have reason enough to kill him?"

"Sure, if he killed Marietta, which he didn't. Look, Hanna, the kid wasn't that type. Go on, laugh, but there are certain kinds of people who wouldn't kill under any circumstances. He's one of them. More than that, he was engaged to be married. He had too much to lose by playing Marietta or knocking her off. When will you smart guys ever learn?"

"I was just going to ask the same thing of you. Well, if I went to work on you, it would probably be murder. So I'll drag my boy out of here and leave you with this pleasant thought—I'm gunning for Chapin. If he's innocent he'll come out and face things. If he's guilty he'll stay under cover until I smoke him out. Then I'll kill him and come after you. Goodnight, Talbot."

He awakened Joe after a couple of minutes and cuffed him out the door. I locked it and slid the bolt. Then I lay down and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER III

"I Die With the Dawn"

I AWOKE with sunlight streaming in on me, and the first thing that came back to me was Harry Chapin's predicament. I died then—just as I told Grace Perry I'd die each day until Chapin was safe.

Somewhere that kid was hiding. Depending upon a friend to shield him. But how long would this friend go through with it after he read the papers about what Chapin was supposed to have done? And when Chapin saw those papers, would he emerge to try and clear himself? And get shot to death on sight?

I had to do something fast and I remembered an old client of mine who hadn't forgotten a little job I'd done for him. Martin Dexter mingled with the best of society

and sometimes the worst. I needed information and I thought he could give it to me. I took the subway crosstown, left it and hailed a cab to take me the rest of the way to Martin Dexter's home.

Dexter was gray-haired, important in business, and got around a lot. I explained the whole thing in detail. Dexter clucked his tongue.

"But you're only guessing this Chapin kid didn't kill Marietta and the policeman. You even thought he had, when you told Hanna about him."

"I didn't know his people then—or his girl. Mr. Dexter, what sort of man is Atterbury?"

"A fine man. Member of the best clubs. I understand he arose by pulling at his own bootstraps. In my opinion a man's better for that. He was a stock broker for some years and retired about ten months ago. Got sick of it, I guess. No one ever met his wife. I suppose she is dead for he never speaks of her."

"She ran away with another man," I explained. "He told me that. He also said Marietta was a chip off the old lady. Wild and sexy. I can believe it for I knew Marietta a while. She even tried to make me."

"Hmm." Dexter mused. "What's Atterbury got to do with it anyhow, besides being Marietta's father and understandingly enough wanting her out of Gus Hanna's grasp?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I suppose. Here is another angle. Hanna claims someone is lining up things to take over all gambling in town. Chapin was supposed to be stooging for him and Marietta was acting for Hanna and the other gambling interests. Who could be back of such a scheme?"

Dexter arose abruptly and paced the floor for a couple of minutes. I was pretty sure I'd struck oil.

"I'm a gambler, Talbot," he said. "I've always been. It's in my blood. I've gambled from the Klondike to the fancy palaces of the Riviera and the phony Florida joints. I know a lot of gamblers, men who make their living on the right side of the wheel. The side that always wins. For the last couple of months I've seen a man around town. Somebody big enough to do just what you suspect."

I mulled that over. Finding such a man wouldn't help me locate Chapin or stop him from being killed, but I might at least

prove his innocence after they drilled him. If that did any good.

"I'm listening, Mr. Dexter."

"This is dangerous information, especially if things are as you state. This man is really a syndicate. About fifty gambling places are financed by him and pay him tribute. So far he hasn't opened any houses locally but he may be lining them up to take over all at once."

"That I can guess. What's his name?"

"Tell me why you want to know," Dexter hedged.

I told him. "This kid Chapin—if he worked for such a man—would go to him for protection when things went sour. They curdled for Chapin all right. Confidentially he wrote his girl a note and stated that a friend was to shelter him. That friend could be the gambler."

Dexter nodded. "And you'd risk your neck to reach Chapin and try to save his life?"

"Now look, Mr. Dexter, if the kid finds out what he is wanted for, he'll come out. When he does, Hanna's boys will cut him down if the cops don't get to him first. He won't be taken alive, not even if he wants to be."

Dexter sat down again. "Look up Steve Benham. He's tall, gray-haired and looks like a movie actor. You'll probably find him at the Waldorf. Now if anything happens to you, don't blame me for it."

I grinned my appreciation. "And see if you can find out more about Atterbury's wife. Whom she ran away with and if she is still alive. That might help, too."

Dexter laughed. "I'll have to get a private detective's license myself if this keeps up. I'll do what I can."

I WENT away cheerfully. I had a lead. Something to keep my prying nose busy. Something to work on. My next stop was the Waldorf.

The minute I stepped into the lobby, a house dick bore down on me. I looked like that. But I knew him and he knew me. His name was Ryan.

"Talbot, luvamike, what are you doing here?" he asked.

I said, "I want to know about a guest here and maybe get a pass into his room. Can do? The guy's name is Steve Benham."

"You're playing the big time, Talbot.

What you fooling with a guy like that for?"

"Personal reasons," I said.

"Yeah, personal, I'll bet. I can get you into his room but that's all. Benham is the biggest thing in the racket field to hit the house in a long time. I don't know what he's up to but he brought along some hot shots. They don't live here, just come to see him and get their orders, I guess."

We used a service elevator to reach Benham's floor. Ryan tapped on the door, drew no answer and used his pass key. I went in. Ryan closed the door and disappeared. I looked around. Benham didn't travel light. There were two trunks and three big suitcases. They'd all been unpacked.

I searched the clothing in the closet found nothing and tackled the writing desk. There I found a list of names in a very neat, precise hand. Practically every important gambler in town was on that list. So Dexter had been right. Benham was here to take over. Hanna had the correct tip too.

I sat there wondering how Benham had ever connected with a quiet, decent-living kid like Chapin. They simply didn't go together and yet Chapin had certainly been up to something. If Benham was hiding the kid, it would be in a good place.

Just on a hunch I picked up the phone.

"This is Mr. Benham," I said. "I made a phone call today—or maybe it was yesterday. I can't remember the name of the party but I would recognize the number. Will you read off the calls I made, please?"

The operator said, "Yes, sir, just a moment." Then she read me six numbers which I noted down. None were familiar and I checked through the phone book. Not to find the numbers at random but to compare them with the phones of people already involved.

I GOT a single result. Benham had phoned Gus Hanna's place very late the night before. Hours after the murders had been committed.

I put the list in my pocket, wondering just what Benham called Hanna for. They were supposed to be deadly enemies, if Benham was here to take over Hanna's interests.

Benham would have the answers to those questions.

I lit a cigarette, selected the most comfortable chair in the living-room and sat

down. The only thing lacking was a bottle and I stirred myself to look for one. Benham apparently had his booze sent up by the drink. There wasn't a drop around. I shrugged and resumed my chair. Benham might toss me out; he might enter a formal complaint to the police or have some of his gunboys take care of me. It didn't matter. I'd been through so much I could take all anybody had to offer.

I reached for the list of phone numbers again and my fingers encountered a piece of stiff cardboard. I took out the studio shot of Marietta Atterbury. The one her father had given me for purposes of identifying her. I looked closely at that pretty face and shook my head. Anybody who looked like her should never die.

I turned the portrait over. It was numbered and dated five years ago. I put it back into my pocket and wished that Benham would return.

I was nodding sleepily when I heard a key fitted into the lock. The man who entered answered to Benham's description perfectly. He could have been a movie actor if appearance was all he needed. He was tall, gray of hair, suit, shirt and tie. His eyes were gray too—and hard. There wasn't the slightest surprise in them when he looked at me.

He said, "Hello there. You must be Talbot."

I said, "How'd you know me?"

He shrugged, took off his coat and hanged it on the back of a chair. He looked casually around the room. "I had a talk with Gus Hanna. He accused me of being responsible for the murder of some girl and a cop. He became a little absurd about it, and your name entered the conversation. He described you and I made it my business to learn a little more about you."

He smiled and crossed his legs, making a fast play toward his inner pocket while those gray eyes studied me carefully. I didn't move. If he was going for a gun, I could do nothing about it. If it was a bluff to see how steady my nerves were, I'd have him guessing. It was a bluff. He took out a leather cigarette case.

"Find nothing of interest?" he asked me casually.

I shook my head. "You know I didn't. And I really searched the joint. Why don't you get huffy? People usually do when a stranger sneaks into their house and looks

around. Some even go so far as to call the cops."

Benham chuckled softly. "I don't want cops around, any more than you do. I meet too many in my line. Now, I suppose

you think I hired that kid—what's his name . . . ?"

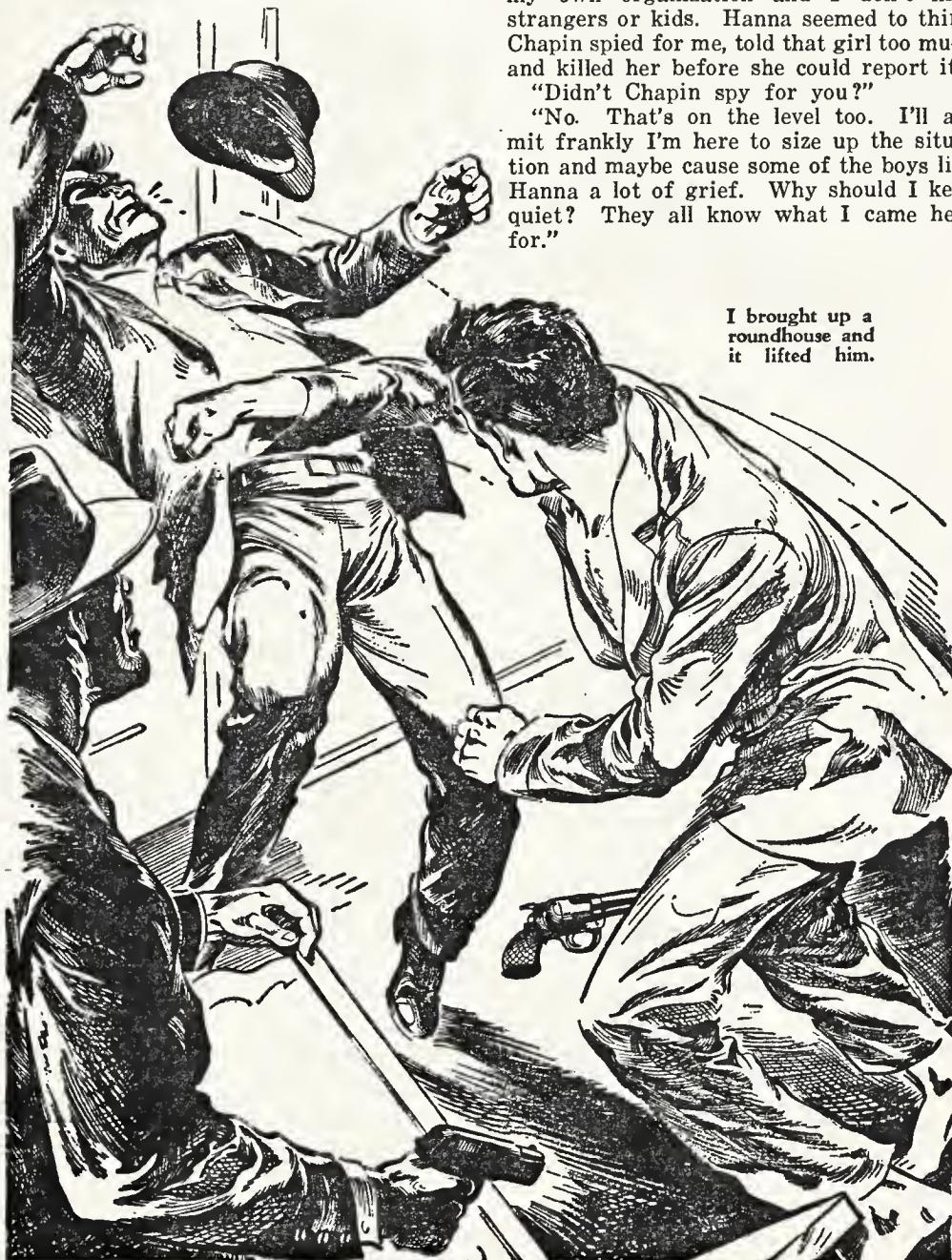
"Chapin. Harry Chapin." I leaned forward and accepted a cigarette.

"Oh, yes. Never heard of him. I have my own organization and I don't hire strangers or kids. Hanna seemed to think Chapin spied for me, told that girl too much and killed her before she could report it."

"Didn't Chapin spy for you?"

"No. That's on the level too. I'll admit frankly I'm here to size up the situation and maybe cause some of the boys like Hanna a lot of grief. Why should I keep quiet? They all know what I came here for."

I brought up a roundhouse and it lifted him.



I said, "Chapin told that murdered girl he worked for someone who intended to take over the rackets. Is there anybody else like you in town?"

"Not to my knowledge. How did you know what Chapin told the girl? She's dead."

"She told Hanna," I answered rather weakly and realized just how puny my backing up of that statement was. I had only Hanna's word for what Maretta said. Hanna was assuming fresh proportions in my mind.

Benham knew it too. He just shrugged in silent contempt, as if to dismiss anything that Hanna said.

I GOT up. "You haven't that kid hidden away somewhere, dead or alive?"

"I have not. Why are you so interested, Talbot?"

"I put the kid in the spot he now occupies, Benham. I made a mistake and I like to rectify mistakes. Especially when they may mean the death of someone. What you do in town is none of my business. Not unless you're lying and know where Chapin is. I'll be going now, if you have no objections."

"Run along." He laughed. "I was going to invite you to have a drink but you turned huffy. Beat it, Talbot, and next time knock when you want to come into my suite."

"Believe it or not," I said, "that's what I did. So long, Benham."

I walked out, as far from locating Chapin as before. I'd learned nothing except that Benham was in town, did answer the type of man Chapin could have been spying for and that, in my opinion, Benham was capable of anything on the books.

But what could I do about it? Hanna's suspicions of Benham were only theory, so far. I wondered if Atterbury might have the answers to any of these questions. Perhaps Maretta had contacted him and might have spilled some little thing. I took a cab from the Waldorf. Anyway, he'd paid me five-hundred dollars and at least rated a report on the progress of things.

Atterbury came to the door. If he had any servants, I saw no signs of them. He seemed glad to see me and fixed a drink. We sat in a first-floor study and he closed the door tightly.

"This barn of a place is full of drafts,"

he explained. "Now, have you learned anything?"

I shook my head. "Only that it still looks as if Chapin killed your daughter and I refuse to believe it more than ever. The story is that Chapin was stooging for a gambler named Benham. I met him. A cold-eyed sort to whom I bet murder is no stranger. Did Maretta ever mention his name?"

"I hadn't seen or talked to Maretta in almost a month," Atterbury said, and any hope that he'd be of help went sailing away. I began to feel that I was wasting my time. If everybody else was convinced that Chapin was the murderer, why should I argue the point? What did his life mean to me anyhow?

I glanced around the study. It was hung with oils. Small canvasses but I bet myself they cost a fortune. While Atterbury mixed another drink, I walked around, looking at the portraits. They were by recent artists. Amerthorn, DuBois, Vanetti and even one by Dali that gave me the jitters.

I took the drink Atterbury offered me and sat down again.

"I'm finished," I said. "Washed up. I can't go on trying to run down the full meaning of your daughter's death, because it becomes more and more dangerous to me. Hanna, any of his boys, Benham and others might decide I was getting in their hair at any time. If they do, I'll be combed out with bullets."

"Let it go," Atterbury urged. "You did your best and I'm satisfied. Chapin killed her. Eventually he'll pay the penalty. There isn't anything else for us to do."

We shook hands on that and I departed. Atterbury was satisfied. Hanna and Westover were certain as to the murderer's identity. Everyone had called it quits on the investigation except me. I was the original dim-wit, to go on risking my neck like this. They'd find Chapin sooner or later and some guns would go off and then the whole thing would end cold.

I called Dexter to see if he'd learned anything more.

He said, "I tried to check on Atterbury, his daughter and his wife who ran away with another man some twenty years ago. I couldn't find out a thing. Except that Mrs. Atterbury had a close friend in those days with whom she might have kept in contact. Her name is Tessie Markham."

An old vaudeville actress. I imagine you could trace her through Equity."

It was a poor, vague lead, hardly worth following. But I followed it. Equity wasn't above giving me Mrs. Markham's address when I told them I was doing a series of articles on old vaudeville performers. Anything which might spark vaudeville back to life was their meat.

CHAPTER IV

"Liquor-Loosened Lips"

SHE lived uptown about ten miles, I guessed, by the length of the subway ride. It was far past Harlem and one of those side streets that grow on the fringes of great cities and look as if they belonged in a village. Her home was a one-story affair with about four rooms, judging from the outside. A cute place if it had been kept up. No paint brush had touched it in years; the tiny yard was overgrown and if I hadn't seen lights in the window, I'd have sworn it was abandoned.

I walked up on the porch and rang the bell. I heard it clamoring away inside but nobody came to let me in. I stepped over to a window looking into a tiny living-room. There was a sloppily fat, carelessly dressed woman sprawled out on a davenport.

She had bright red cheeks from too much rouge unskillfully applied. Her mouth was wide open and looked like the opening of a crimson-edged barrel. One flabby arm dangled off the davenport and the fingers touched the floor about two inches away from a bottle. It looked like it had contained gin and she looked as if its contents were inside her.

I backtracked, hurried away and found a liquor store where I squandered three bucks on a pint of good whiskey. I knew that gin drinkers prefer whiskey but don't get enough for their money. In ten minutes I was back at the house. This time I kept my finger on the bell until it awakened her.

There was a burglar chain on the door and she peered through the crack with bleary eyes. "Who're you?" she demanded. "Go away!"

I said, "I've got a message for you, from a friend. A very important message."

"Any money in it, sport?"

"Might be. There's a drink. I've got a bottle and you look like you could use one."

The magic words got action. She closed the door, undid the chain and let me in. For someone who'd killed that bottle of gin, she was doing pretty well and she had nasty little eyes full of suspicion. I began to get the idea that behind those eyes was a heap of information which might settle this whole thing.

"Who sent you?" she asked. "How'd you know where to find me and what are you? You smell copper to me."

"Private," I said, "and looking for an old friend of yours named Atterbury. Marietta's mother."

"How'd you know she is Marietta's mother?" the old harridan screeched. "Who told you that? Where'd you get the dope? Spill it or you won't get a word out of me!"

"Easy," I warned and fished the bottle out of my pocket. I made a ceremony of ripping away the plastic seal and then twisting the cap. I grinned at her, tilted the bottle upward and let some of the stuff trickle down my throat.

SHE watched it all with eyes grown beady in covetousness. I put the bottle down, holding it against one knee. "I needed that. Now, where were we?"

"You were just telling me who gave you the dirt about Margaret Atterbury. The neck of the bottle got in the way. Give me a swallow. I'm so dry I couldn't say another word."

I silently handed over the bottle and wondered if a pint was going to be enough. The way that powerful stuff went down her throat was amazing. She handed it back, half gone, and wiped her lips with two fingers. Dainty-like.

"Where were we?" she demanded, somewhat mollified now.

"I want to find Mrs. Atterbury. I'm private dick for an insurance company and there may be some money for her."

That got me a fishy eye. She didn't believe a word of it and I knew that. But it was a line. Something to break the ice. She lit a cigarette, pulled the housedress up a little and swung both legs onto the davenport. She smoked silently and stared at me.

"You know," she said cheerfully, "you're the biggest liar I ever met. What do you

really want Margaret for—if I do know where she is?"

"Okay, okay," I said. "Her husband wants to find her. Marietta is dead. There's a thing known as a funeral and it would look nicer if Marietta's mother was present. I get a hundred if I find her in time. You get fifty of that. Is it a deal?"

"But I don't know where she is. I haven't seen Margaret in ten years. I retired then, to live like a lady and mind my own business. Let's have that bottle."

I handed it over and watched her kill it. No Bowery bum could have done a better job.

She ran a pointed tongue over the mouth of the bottle, sighed contentedly and hurled the bottle toward a corner. Then she closed her eyes and dared me to make her talk.

I tried and got nothing except jeers and laughs and a few uncomplimentary cheers. But the booze was taking hold. If I hadn't lost touch with people like this, she'd be hollering for more. I'd get it for her and sell it, shot by shot, until she told me everything she knew.

"Another little drink wouldn't do me any harm." She hummed and gave me what she probably thought was a coy look. I stood up.

"Okay, okay. I'll get another bottle. Provided you tell me what I want to know."

She leered up at me. "For a drink I'd do just about anything, mister. Get the bottle and find out."

I did as she asked. Just an errand boy for a souse. Even cheap whiskey was expensive and I'd been making too many dents in my bankroll.

She was still on the davenport when I left myself in, and apparently asleep. I had an idea she was shamming so I stepped quietly over to a table and pulled open the drawer very softly. One eye opened.

"No, you don't," she yelled at me. "No you don't go snooping around! Give me the bottle."

I surrendered it. Let her drink the whole thing. Pass into a state of coma for all I cared, just so long as she talked. All I wanted was an address. But it wasn't until she bordered on a drunken stupor that she began to get frisky. With exaggerated emphasis she laid a finger alongside her nose.

"You wanna find Maggie, eh? You just wanna find her. Atterbury is lookin' for

her. In a pig's eye he is. He hates her guts."

"That was years ago. Anyway, Atterbury loved Marietta and wants her mother at the funeral."

"He hated her guts too. He hates everybody's guts. Nobody's good enough for him. That's it. Sure Maggie ran away. With Timmy Bryan. Why not? She was young and he was young and what did Atterbury know about anything except making money? Most of all love. You tell me that."

Very gently I said, "Suppose we let Margaret Atterbury tell me. Where is she? What name does she use since the divorce?"

"What divorce?" Tessie snickered. "You don't know a damned thing about this case. Not a damned thing. Go on, beat it. I'm sick of you."

I stood over her, fingers spread apart, hands coming down toward her throat. "I'm sick of you too, Tessie. You're a drunken old harridan but you know where Margaret Atterbury lives, and you're going to tell me or I'll wring that liquor-soaked neck of yours. Which is it?"

SHE sobered up for about five seconds and showed a harrowing terror. "Don't—don't do that. Don't. She lives on Carmody Place. Number Seventy. That's it. If you don't believe me, go there and see. Then come back and kill me if I lied. It's the truth I tell you."

I straightened up. "All right, and we'll make that a promise. If she isn't there, I'll be back all right."

She was passing out. "See what good it'll do you," she muttered. "Yeah, a lot of good. . . ."

I wondered what she meant by that but it was too late to question her. She was completely out. I kicked the partly empty bottle out of my way and started for the door. On second thought I searched the place. For the first time I noticed the jarring, bizarre effects which a mixture of poverty and wealth produced.

There were cracked and ancient curtains on the windows but a small portable bar in one corner. Leather covered—the real stuff. I found where she flung her empties. She drank gin mostly, but it was expensive gin. Her pantry was well stocked with luxury foods to be cooked in greasy, battered

pans and served on cracked plates. I didn't get it. Unless somebody was supporting her, and nobody in their right mind would do that.

I went out of there, down to the sidewalk and turned north, looking for a cab. Carmody Place was a good distance away. I was wishing my suspects and informants would move closer together after this.

Then the car which, until now, had been proceeding at a moderate pace on its own side of the road, suddenly veered toward me. There was a flash of flame from the window beside the driver and a bullet whistled past me.

I didn't stop to argue. Wagging your tongue or exercising your tonsils is mighty poor defense against real bullets.

Another slug zipped by me. Just before I heard it zing, I thought no man could leap across a sidewalk, a three-foot cleared space and land behind a low hedge, all without touching the ground. I did though and I kept right on moving even if the wind was knocked out of me by the fall. I squirmed crazily along that hedge until I found a spot shielded by very tight branch growths. There I turned my sideway escape into a route to the rear.

Of course Tessie had phoned somebody while I was out buying that second bottle. She had wanted the booze, but almost as much, an opportunity to make that call. I decided Tessie hadn't seen the last of me.

CARMODY PLACE was exactly what I thought it would be. A quiet, modest suburban section of small houses and yet well within the city limits. Mrs. Atterbury's was the last one down the short street. It was completely darkened.

I rang the bell for the sake of formality, gave it about half a minute and then jumped the porch railing and went around to the back. I was looking for a window through which I might get inside. From sheer force of habit, I tried the back door. Sometimes a burglar or a snooping dick will go to all kinds of trouble to effect an entrance when a door will be wide open.

This one wasn't locked. I stepped in warily. Tessie had set one trap for me. Perhaps she had awakened sufficiently to tell my would-be executioner that I was very likely going to see Mrs. Atterbury and he could find me there.

Nothing happened until my foot kicked

something that slid across the floor and ended up with a clanging clatter against the wall.

I froze, waiting for the inevitable. Nothing but silence maintained its spell around me. I figured that if the racket hadn't awakened anybody, turning on the lights certainly wouldn't. I located the switch and snapped them on.

The thing I'd kicked was a burglar chain off the back door. It had been ripped right out of its sockets. Then I noticed that the pantry was a mess. Cans of coffee, flour and tea were dumped into one mound. Anything with a lid on it had been opened. I hurried into the next room which proved to be a small dining room. There too, drawers had been ransacked. I found her in the living-room.

She was about forty-five with dyed hair that had turned gray at the roots and for about half an inch upward. At a single glance you could tell she was Marietta's mother. They had the same finely shaped nose, rounded chin. The same eyes. Oh, yes—exactly the same because Mrs. Atterbury's were staring in death too.

She'd been strangled with a cord from the bathrobe she wore. From the looks of it, someone had busted in. Why she hadn't heard the killer, I couldn't imagine, because ripping the burglar chain off must have made enough noise to startle a deaf person.

At any rate Mrs. Atterbury had been sitting here, reading a newspaper which was on her lap. One hand held it tightly, crumpling the corner in one last spasm of agony. A sub-headline told about Marietta's death. The newspaper had been folded twice. The way she held it was hardly natural.

The body was stone cold and limp. Rigor had vanished hours ago. Those fingers should have relaxed their grip then. It looked as if someone had curled those dead fingers around the newspaper after this woman had been dead a long long time.

NEXT, I proceeded to search the house, trying to begin where the killer had left off. After a while I found a wastebasket upside down. Most of its contents were small, torn bits of paper. One strip peeked out from beneath the rug. I rescued that one.

It was a quarter of a business envelope.

The important quarter, for it contained the printed name and address of a law firm in some town called Midbury, way upstate. I filed that in my pocket for future reference. Then I got out of there and went back to my office to think.

I reached for the torn piece of envelope and also fished out the picture of Marietta once more. I laid this, face down, on the desk. Then I slowly relaxed, picked up the photo and looked at that date on the back of it again.

It was five years old. Apparently it was the date when the photo was taken or processed because the writing matched that of the code numbers also inscribed on the back.

But, I asked myself, if this picture was five years old, why did Marietta look exactly as she did the night she died? She was supposed to be twenty years old. Five years ago she'd have been fifteen. No fifteen-year-old girl has the glamour and sophistication that photo showed. Not even in this modern day and age.

Paint and powder a fifteen-year-old girl, dress her in low-cut gowns and sables and orchids, and you still can't hide the fact that she's just a kid. The face in the picture wasn't that of any kid. Wise, mature eyes looked at me. The mouth was harsher-looking than I'd noticed before.

Something was all wrong and I really did some thinking then, carefully sorting out the facts I knew so far and putting them together to make a single blueprint. The answers were beginning to come.

I checked on the address of Chapin's art store and went there by taxi. It was a long, narrow store with a single portrait in the window bordered with rich purple draperies. An attractive and eye-catching display.

Inside, the walls were covered with portraits of all sizes and shapes. A trim girl with shell-rimmed glasses came walking up from the rear of the store. She wanted to know if there was anything she could do for me.

"I'm a friend of the Chapins," I said in my society voice. "Both Senior and Junior. I thought—well, I hated to see Mr. Chapin, Senior, because he has been so ill, and now with this trouble his son is in. But I want to help, if I can."

"How do you propose to go about it?" she asked me blandly.

I rubbed my nose and grinned. "That's for us to figure out, maybe."

She gave a dry laugh. "Ha-ha! Good-bye, officer."

"Wait!" I checked her. "I'm no cop. I mean exactly what I say."

She surveyed me a bit more critically then. "Well, you don't act like one, I admit that. The last one who came in here threatened me with everything from a rubber hosing to fifty years in prison. How do you expect me to help? I don't know where Harry is."

"Did he have any very close friends? Someone he might run to in a case of this kind?" It was a silly question but it would serve to get her talking.

"Not that I know of. Harry didn't have time for friends. He worked himself half to death in this store. Until about two weeks ago. He was trying so hard to make a real go of it. To take his father's place and show him he could manage."

"Yes, he's that kind of a lad," I admitted cheerfully. "You say he worked all hours?"

"He never let up. Our main business is furnishing matched sets of famous portraits. They are hard to collect. You get the order first and then start looking around for the canvasses to fill it. Sometimes that takes three or four years. Harry was on the track of half a dozen portraits to fill sets for which he had customers. One sale—any one of those—would have put the store on its feet."

"Then he couldn't have been gallivanting around making love to the sort of girl they say he killed. You don't court those kind in two weeks."

"You should know." I was promptly flattened. "You look like the type who must have found out."

I'd followed her back to the office part of the store. She had a letter stuck in the typewriter. It was half written and addressed to someone whose name made people jump. This poor kid was trying her best to preserve what was left of the business by stating in the letter that the search for the DuBois canvas was still going on.

I LET it go at that and went away. My newly formed idea was far from ready to work on. I walked the streets to figure it out.

It was Hanna's skinny boy named Joe

who took me. I had wandered back close to my hotel when he stepped out of a doorway with a hand in his coat pocket. His eyes glittered. That guy hated me.

"Let's go," he said without wasting any words.

I leaned against the building wall and lit a cigarette, tantalizing him by not saying a word for a couple of minutes. The streets were crowded. He had a gun but if he showed it or made any open gestures with the weapon, he'd attract plenty of attention and he knew it. I liked to watch him burn.

"Suppose," I said, "you add 'please' to that request, take your hand out of your pocket, and tell me where I'm to go."

"I could send you there—fast," he said hoarsely. "I will, too, one of these days. But Hanna wants to see you right now."

"Please?" I taunted him.

He gulped and said it. Probably the first time since he was a hand-waving kid in school that he uttered the word. I grinned at him and followed along. We proceeded straight to Hanna's de luxe club. By day it was surprisingly tawdry. Sunlight did bad things to it. You could see the tinsel for what it was, and with the air conditioning off, it smelled exactly like one of those joints in the Bowery. Stale booze and tobacco smoke.

We went up the stairs—the same ones Harry Chapin had breezed down. At the top I disregarded my playmate and walked on past Hanna's door. The corridor led to the gambling rooms but there was also another set of stairs going down. The punk came up behind him, gun drawn now.

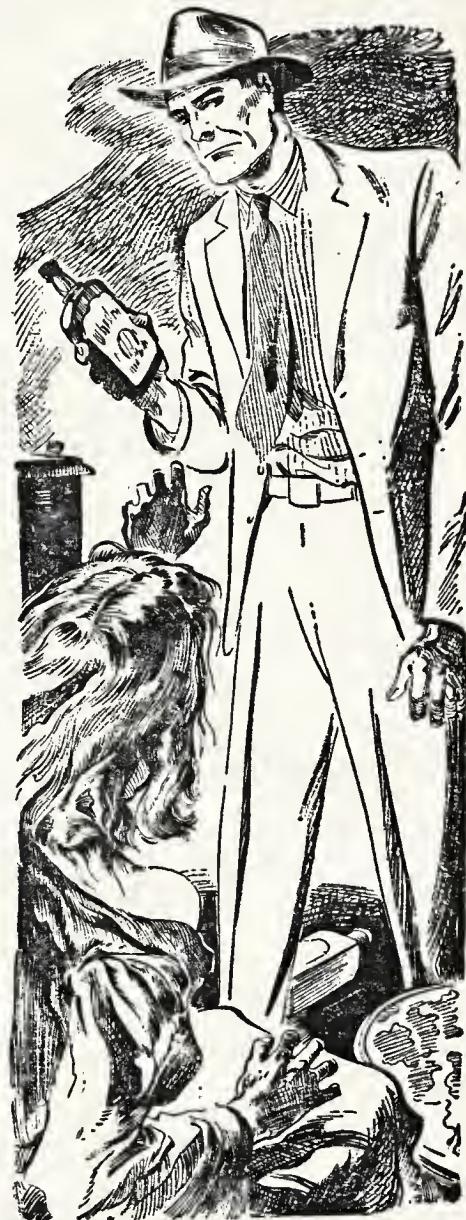
"Put it away," I said, "or I'll bat you over the head with it. Where does that stairway go?"

"To the bar," he replied, probably astonished that anybody would ask him a civil question. "You also reach the alley that way."

I patted his cheek. "You're a nice kid, Joe. Just minus brains. Now take me to Hanna."

THE gambler was slumped low in his chair behind the desk. He greeted me weakly and I sat down. I looked longingly at a decanter on a nearby built-in bar. He didn't tumble.

"Have you found out anything, Talbot?" he asked.



"Give me a swallow," she said. "I'm so dry I couldn't say another word."

I said, "Uh-huh. That you and I have been played for a pair of neat suckers. Mostly it was your fault. You never really had an honest reason for insinuating that Chapin was a spying stooge for Benham, did you?"

"Marietta told me he was asking too

many questions. Benham is in town to take us over. He isn't getting too far but a spy like Chapin would have been useful."

"Nix," I said. "Marietta told you that because it was the first thing she thought of. Chapin was making violent love to her and she didn't want you to find out."

Hanna sat up straight at that one. His eyes became a little more narrowed. He said, "Now hold it, Shamus. By making a statement like that, you admit to having seen and talked with Chapin. Where is he?"

I waved a careless hand, "Jumping at conclusions again. I haven't seen him but I do own a set of brains, whatever they are worth."

"So?" He was still unsatisfied and unconvinced.

"So I used those brains and my experience and came up with three juicy murders, none of which Harry Chapin committed. In fact, I'm willing to bet he doesn't even know he is suspected."

"What are you giving me?" Hanna derided. "You heard the shots! You saw Chapin running for his life down the stairs. He reached the alley. There were more shots and the cop went down."

"All granted," I said. "But Chapin is a nice kid. Unused to such things as violence and murder. He saw Marietta dead about half a minute after she'd been shot. The murderer either reached the back stairway in time to avoid Chapin or he stepped into one of the rooms. Chapin saw Marietta dead and got panicky. All he knew was that if he was found there, he'd be in trouble."

"What about the cop?"

"Killed before Chapin reached him. Or maybe right after he whizzed by. The cop hadn't drawn his gun so he couldn't have been alarmed by anything. The murderer cut him down. Chapin never paused to find out what was going on. He probably figured the shots were aimed at him."

"Okay, then where did Chapin go?"

"To the home and protection of a man he trusted. You couldn't make me tell you the address with hot coals and ten guys like Joe. I got Chapin on this spot because I accepted things at their face value, like a fool. I intend to get him off that spot so I'll stop dying every time I think about it."

Hanna was half convinced. He knew I

always levelled at the showdown anyway. He studied me intently for a couple of minutes.

"Can you prove all this?"

"I hope so. It will take a lot of luck but it can be done. Alone, Hanna. I don't want anybody tagging me. Give me an hour or so."

"If you tell me what Chapin was really trying to do here. I've got to know."

"He ran his father's art store. He was working at it all the while he was here, Hanna, every moment of the time. And he wasn't trying to chisel in on your girl any more than he murdered her. He was—in a word—a sap."

"Maybe I am too," Hanna told me, "but I'll take a chance. Two hours, Talbot. You produce in that time or, so help me, I'll send out for you and this time it will stick."

CHAPTER V

"Resume of Murder"

I MADE a long-distance phone call and then rode out to Atterbury's place. I was the smart guy. I knew everything. Atterbury opened the door and shoved a blue-black automatic into my ribs. It seemed I wasn't going to surprise him.

He was very sure of himself. I wished I felt a tenth as certain of the outcome. He forced me into the same small study where we'd had our conversation not many hours ago. He closed the door, motioned me to freeze, and got behind me. His hands went through my pockets and removed Marietta's photo and the corner of the envelope.

His face was gray when he came around to face me. "You found this at my wife's home, didn't you, Talbot?"

I nodded. "It was partly under the rug. You missed it."

He sighed. "A man can't cover everything, I suppose. Well, there's little sense in trying to deceive you any longer. Why did you come here? To see how much I'd pay?"

"No. To get Harry Chapin. Is he here?"

"Oh, yes. Upstairs, hiding in one of my guest rooms. He thinks Hanna is after him. How much do you know?"

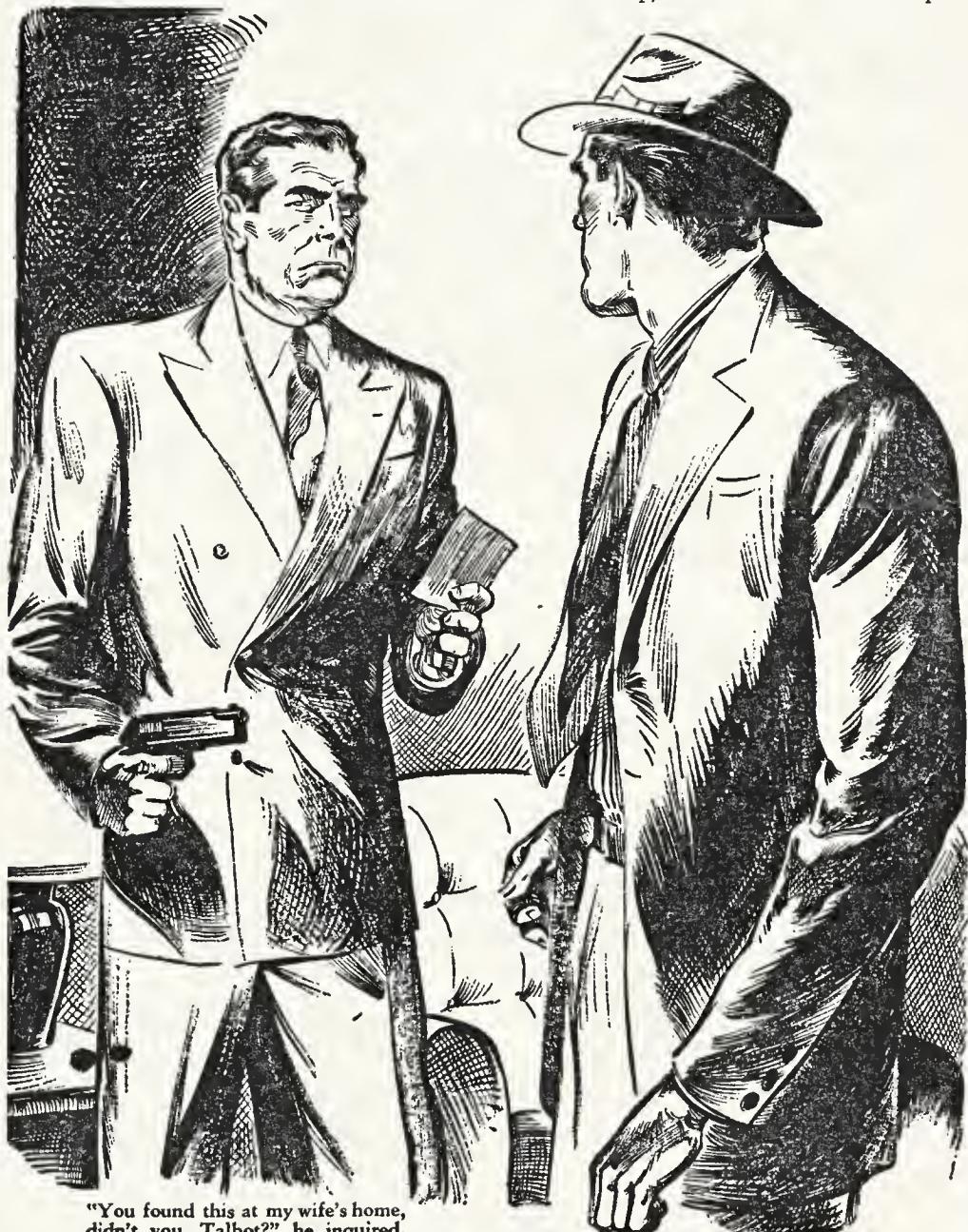
"I phoned the firm of attorneys whose name appears on that piece of envelope."

He snorted and sat down. "Then you know everything. Maybe we can do some business but I have to be sure you aren't bluffing. Let's play the cards face up."

"Why not?" I said. "Marietta wasn't your daughter. She was born five years

before you married her mother but you didn't want that known. The photo was a dead giveaway. It was taken five years ago, which would have made Marietta fifteen years old at the time. The picture says she was at least twenty."

"A bad slip, wasn't it? I had other pho-



"You found this at my wife's home, didn't you, Talbot?" he inquired.

tos of her I could have given you. How about a drink? I think we both need one."

"So long as it isn't spiked with a drop or two of cyanide," I said, as pleasantly as possible under existing circumstances. I sounded like a funeral director before the casket is closed.

"I'm not as crude as that," he told me, and fixed a pair of drinks. He sat down again, holding the gun on me with one hand, gently rotating the glass with the other while ice cubes tinkled merrily. "Go on, Talbot."

I said, "You probably didn't lie about Marietta's mother. Maybe she wasn't much good. She left you years ago but you kept Marietta. You became wealthy and influential while your wife went through hell. It didn't matter to you. But a man of your type is never satisfied. Your wife's people owned some very valuable property. It would go to her eventually and when it did, you wanted it. How close am I to the truth, Atterbury?"

"Bull's-eye. Perfect. Why not, when that law firm explained the whole thing?"

I WENT on. "Your wife guessed you'd take some kind of action and you knew darned well she'd freeze that property so you'd never get it. Unless you acted quickly. You did—by strangling her. Through the years you'd kept good track of things by using Tessie Markham. You supported her for that reason alone. She was friendly with your wife and found out when that property was due to fall into her hands. Tessie also phoned you that I was snooping, and you took a couple of pot shots at me. That was helpful."

"Just how?" he asked pleasantly.

"Hanna's men would have got me with the first bullet. I was a wide open target. It had to be somebody with little experience in using a gun. Shall I get to Chapin's part now?"

"Of course. I want to know everything." He sipped his drink, watching me narrowly above the rim of the glass. I'd never be able to jump him. He was too calm and ready for trouble.

"Chapin wanted a picture you own. A DuBois. His specialty is filling out sets by the same artist. He lacked the DuBois you have. I know because I read a letter his firm was sending to a buyer. Chapin came here and you decided to use him. You told

him he could have the picture if he got Marietta away from Hanna. He'd have to do it by wooing her out of a gambler's influence. Chapin tried. Marietta may have half guessed why he was doing it. She told Hanna a phony yarn about Chapin being a spy for some gambling syndicate."

"That was a great break for me," Atterbury said. "It fitted in nicely."

"Marietta heard about it and used it as an excuse for Chapin's hanging around her. Maybe she was falling for the guy. Maybe he was better than I think. At any rate he was your fall guy. You slipped into Hanna's place that night and killed Marietta just about the time Chapin was due. Then you ran down the back stairs and shot the cop right before or after Chapin passed him. You had his gun. It wouldn't have been hard to persuade him to be armed when fooling around Hanna's place. And to get him to turn the weapon over to you later."

"Nice work, Talbot. You'd go far. Providing, of course, you weren't in your present predicament."

"Things are a little tight," I admitted. "Well, you had killed your wife first. Your next step was to go back to her house, plant a newspaper telling about Marietta's death in her hands and so make it seem she died after Marietta. The newspaper got me. It had been folded twice, like a man folds one to stick into his pocket. It hadn't been read beyond page one and if your wife had read of Marietta's death, she'd never have been sitting there. Besides, her body was limp and incapable of gasping the paper unless somebody had tucked it under her fingers."

"I thought I had made that gesture fool-proof. I see I didn't."

I disregarded the interruption. Talking passed time away and every elasped moment might bring somebody to this house. It was a vague chance but worth fighting for.

I said, "You had to make it look as if your wife died after Marietta, because she wasn't your daughter. The fact could be proven and she was your wife's heir. If it was discovered she died before your wife, you'd get the estate. If she died later, she would be presumed heir and upon her death the estate would go to some relative of hers. She certainly wasn't related to you."

Atterbury finished his drink. "Anything else, Talbot?"

I shrugged. "It was that angle which tipped me off. There had to be a reason why the murderer wanted Margaret Atterbury's death stipulated to have occurred after the death of Marietta. That brought family into it and you were the leading candidate."

"And now?" he asked.

"Can I see Chapin?"

"Certainly. I've always intended that you should. But Chapin is very jittery. He doesn't really know what this is all about. He came to me, as I instructed him to if there was any trouble. I've kept newspapers and radio away from him. He thinks Hanna's boys are after him and that you are one of them."

I was beginning to realize what was going to happen.

Atterbury went on! "So Chapin will shoot you, Talbot. Then he will cut and run for it. Right out into the open where there will be a horde of police. They'll let him have it on the spot. I'm just an innocent bystander. Chapin came here to get me. You were present and he shot you instead because you could identify him as a killer. Very pat—and very good, don't you think?"

HE WALKED over to the phone and called the cops. There wouldn't be much time now. He herded me up the stairs until we reached a small window which looked out over the approaches to the house. We'd stay there until Atterbury saw the headlights of the police cars.

Then I'd get it.

My lips were dry and the drink under my belt acted like vinegar. Through my mind shot a million thoughts, disconnected, making little sense, and I couldn't sort them out to think straight. That's what facing death did to me. My brain was trying hard to drown out the idea of danger.

I thought of how close Atterbury had come to getting me trapped in his wife's home—with her body there. I thought of Marietta and the strange statement she'd made about her blood being black to Hanna's being red. She had been referring to her family history and included Atterbury in it. I should have tumbled then.

I thought of Chapin's parents and his girl. That got me and my brain snapped back to some cooler, more lucid thinking.

"They're coming." Atterbury gestured

with his head toward the window. I saw headlights moving very fast.

Somewhere down the long corridor a door clicked. The kid had heard us and was worried enough to try and find out what was going on. Atterbury called his name and Chapin emerged, still pale and thoroughly scared.

Atterbury said, "Take a look at his man, Harry. He's the one who identified you as the killer. He's one of Hanna's men. He came to kill you. I've notified the police to come get him. They'll be here in a few minutes and you'd better run for it. Hide in the woods across the highway from the house. You'll be safe there."

"Stay right here," I shouted. "The cops are already . . ."

Atterbury's finger tightened on the trigger but I went on. "Grace Perry is waiting for you, Chapin."

"But Mr. Atterbury," Chapin said, "how does he know about Grace?"

Atterbury twisted his head just a trifle. I'd hoped that Chapin would address him, take his mind off me for a fraction of a second. I was already tense and waiting. As his head turned, I kicked. The distance from the floor to his gun hand seemed miles in extent but my foot got there in time.

The gun went off, throwing a chunk of lead into the wall. Then I had him.

Chapin misjudged the whole thing and started down the stairs. I jolted Atterbury with a right hook, let him drop and then jumped down the stairs. I landed on Chapin just before he started to open the door. I pulled my punch a little on him because I wasn't sore at the kid.

Atterbury was stirring when I got back to the landing. I let him stir but I collected the gun first. Chapin was on his feet, groggy but getting a little sense into his skull. While police cars pulled up, I gave him the gist of my story and told him to back up my play.

Later, much later, I took him home. I watched the look on his mother's face, grinned back at his father.

I saw Chapin rush to meet Grace Perry when she came.

I felt pretty good. At any rate, I wouldn't be dying every day, worrying about the kid. Sometimes there is more satisfaction in this business than money. Remember, I said sometimes.

DEAD GUY'S TRAP



THE ONLY SEAT was at one of the little tables against the wall. The ash blonde looked up with languid violet eyes as I edged in beside her. One of the Café Mexico waiters came over. "Whiskey sour," I said. The blonde sipped her martini, gave me the violet-eye treatment. I offered her a cigarette. "English?" I asked.

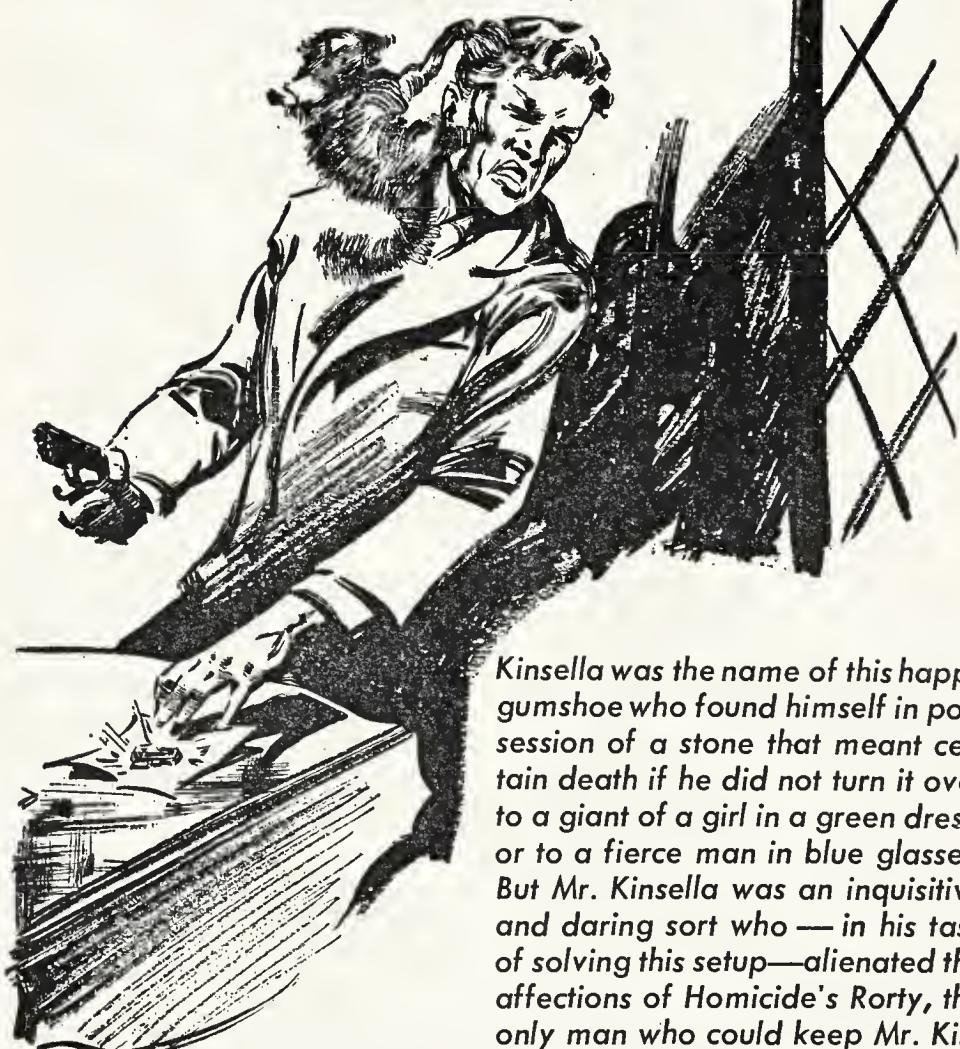
"Australian," she said, propping her elbows on a flat leather purse. "My first visit to the States."

Around us was a buzzing din of talk and the rattle of silverware. Above our table, a bit to the right and facing me and the blonde, ran a balcony hugging the wall in a semi-circle of tables.

Up there on the balcony a drunk lurched forward, reeling between squares of white cloth, his black Charlie Chaplin mustache twitching below a sniffling nose. He looked as though he wanted to sneeze.

By GEOFFREY NORTH

He reached his free hand for the emerald and I threw the kitten in his face, and it hurt him.



Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

The waiter came with my drink. "Anything for the lady?" he asked with a supercilious grin.

She waved him off without looking at him. She was staring up at the balcony where a slender, handsome man, grayed at the temples, fixed a chair for a thin pale youth in a pea-green suit.

The blonde's eyes flicked back to me. "May I have another cigarette?" I reached

Kinsella was the name of this happy gumshoe who found himself in possession of a stone that meant certain death if he did not turn it over to a giant of a girl in a green dress, or to a fierce man in blue glasses. But Mr. Kinsella was an inquisitive and daring sort who — in his task of solving this setup—alienated the affections of Homicide's Rorty, the only man who could keep Mr. Kinsella a citizen of this good earth!

for my pack, offered her one. Her hand stole out from her purse and took it.

Then I saw, up there on the balcony, the slender handsome man stagger and fall, gray temple slumping over white cloth.

The shot came afterward. The pale youth leaped from his chair, put his arm around the sagging body. The drunk with the twitchy nose tripped over a tray. Glass smashed, tray banged. A woman screamed.

Across from me the blonde said casually: "Pay my bill. I'll be waiting for you at the corner of Kearney." She walked off fast without looking back.

I finished my drink, put two dollars on the table, walked out slowly. At the door I turned. Up on the balcony people were milling around.

Outside I moved fast. There was a nip to the wind and a smell of fog as I hurried up Post Street. At the corner a horn tooted, a car angled toward me. The blonde had the door open and I jumped in. The car leaped ahead.

She fixed her mink coat over our knees. I said: "What's the angle? A pick-up?"

She pressed my hand. "You know very well it's no pickup. Not in the ordinary sense." She laughed. "The angle is this way. There was somebody in the café that I didn't want to run into. I wanted to get out fast. You helped me."

"Who'd you see? The fellow that was shot?"

"Was there someone shot?"

"Okay, we'll let that pass."

"No, it wasn't him. And even if it was—if he was shot, he couldn't see me, could he?"

"Who's asking the question? Was it the pale, thin fellow with him?"

"Yes," she said, leaning against me. "Oh, let's not talk about it right now. Not for a while, anyway."

The car jerked to a stop. "You're coming in," she said, opening the door. The street sign read: West Dalton Avenue.

I didn't say anything. "Or are you afraid?" she asked.

I said, "I'm going in. But you'll have to talk."

I helped her into the mink coat, took her hand as she stepped out, long-legged and lightly. I didn't protest when she paid the driver and we went up steps to an apartment house that had a self-starting elevator, rode up to the third floor.

She slipped a key from her purse, opened the door very softly. There was a minute's silence. Then she clicked on the light.

IT WAS a cozy apartment. The living room had a couch in the corner, some chairs, a closet. A hallway, that had a coin-box phone, connected with a tiny kitchen. A little steam was coming through the radiator.

She slipped off her coat, sat on the couch and toasted her ankles over the radiator pipes.

"Let's really get acquainted," I said, scaling my hat on the couch. "Kinsella's the name."

"And mine is Diana Fitz-Hugh." She distinctly separated the two syllables with meticulous enunciation. "And I'm in a bit of a tight spot. And I need help." Her violet eyes went to work.

"Go on."

"By the way," she asked, "just what is your line?"

"I'm a detective. Private investigator, paid snooper." I leered at her cynically.

Her hands fluttered out hopelessly. "Just my luck. I'm almost flat. And I need help. And you're the sort of man that I could lean on." She pressed my arm. "But I haven't much money now. Your retainer would be ridiculously small."

"That's really too bad." I lit a Camel.

"But I expect to have some in a little while," she said.

"Have what?"

"Money. Lots of it. If everything works out the way I hope. I'll pay you liberally then."

"We always get something down." I laughed. "When it's a matter of business. But this isn't my office. Maybe I'll trail with you because I like the damned unsullied manner in which you tell a lie."

"No," she said, "nobody does anything for nothing. I'll pay. You can depend on it. But why did you say I lied?"

"No one has a name like Fitz-Hugh. That is, with the hyphen."

She laughed. "All right, I'm a Russian countess. I peddle caviar—the black kind. And my name's Olga."

"This is Apartment Three-B, isn't it?"

"Well?"

"The name in the letter box downstairs reads 'Lane'."

"Of course, silly," she replied, "I don't want *them* to know I'm here in San Francisco. Won't you please help me?"

"Maybe. Start from the beginning. Tell me all about it," I said.

"We've got to work fast, before things happen."

"Happen to whom?"

"To us."

"Look here, babe. Again, let's start from the beginning. Why don't you want anyone

to know you're in Frisco? And what do you expect them to do?"

"Some people I'm mixed up with," she replied. "They move around. Then things happen."

"You don't want to tell me all about it?"

"I'll let you know a little at a time. Just as it comes along."

"Afraid I'll run out on you now if I know?"

"You wouldn't!" She put her hand on my arm.

"Maybe not. Why don't you trust me?"

"I do. You'll know everything in time. There's no hurry." She smiled. "You look like you could use a drink. The liquor's in the kitchen. Will you fix them?"

INSIDE the neat, snug kitchen, while I was pouring the highballs, I heard the phone ringing in the hallway. I tiptoed close enough to the living-room door so that I could hear her speaking into the mouth-piece.

"No. Not here. The police may know. I'll come to you." There was a pause. "Yes, I've got it." Another pause. "I'm starting at once."

I heard a pen scratching on paper. A minute later, silk swished, a closet door opened softly, something came off a hanger, then another door opened and closed, and she went out.

I went into the living-room. On a chair lay twenty dollars. Underneath the money was a note in a swift, angular writing:

They found me and phoned. I must see them. Please come after me. The place is 519 Cliffside. In the Mission. It's four o'clock now. Don't get there till six. I'm writing you this instead of telling you because I can't stop to answer questions. Thanks for letting me play it my way. Your retainer's on the chair.

D.

I tore the missive into small pieces, opened the window and let the paper flutter out.

Then I got into my coat, and was flipping my hat brim, when I heard a tramp of feet outside. There was a sharp double knock on the door.

I glided to the open window. No fire-escape there. Just a sill and a straight drop of forty feet into the court. I shifted over

to the door so that when it swung back, I'd be behind it. The knock became a triple bang. I thought I recognized the voice.

"Open! It's the law!"

I unlocked the door. A stocky man in blue serge, a derby rolled on the side of his head, pointed steel at me.

"Well," leered the man with the derby, "if it ain't the shamus himself!"

"Hello, Rorty," I said. "Come in."

DETECTIVE RORTY of Homicide sniffed the air suspiciously, standing back to the door, his legs planted apart. "Where's the punk in the green suit?"

I gawked at the ceiling, shrugged, eased into a chair.

"Cut it!" blustered Rorty. "Where's the little punk that was with this Captain Roger Trelease when he got shot at the Café Mexico?"

I lit a cigarette. "You tell me, Rorty. You didn't let him get away!"

"Watch it, gumshoe! I've stood enough of that. No, I didn't let him get away. I wasn't there when it happened. You were there when this Trelease was shot. You were spotted going out right after it happened."

"But I went out with a woman, not a punk. And she wasn't little, Rorty. Taller than yourself."

A flush came into Rorty's gray cheeks. "Keep riding me and see where it lands you. The address here was found in the dead guy's pocket. There was this pale little punk with him when he stopped the lead. You must be mixed up in it or why would you be here. Now where's the punk hiding?"

"Your deductions are all wrong," I said, going to the closet and bringing back a dress dangling from a hanger. "There was a woman here. A tall woman. Look at the length of this dress." I hung the green frock against Rorty's stomach. The bottom of the skirt fluttered below his ankles.

Rorty flipped the garment away, his face reddening. He took two pieces of chewing gum from his pocket, peeled off their wrappers, put one on top of the other, folded them over, put the plug in his jaw.

Rorty said: "Better quit riding me about my height. You're covering—plenty! Suppose we take a little trip downtown?"

I threw the hanger on the bed. "Look here, Jim. Let's get along. I'm in on this now, and maybe we can help each other."

But not if you rush me. I don't like to be rushed. I didn't kill this Trelease and perhaps I'd like to know who did. Let's team it up some way."

Rorty shook his head. "Nope. We go downtown."

I shrugged. "Okay, if you want to be tough about it, let's jog." He opened the door, and as he turned, I stepped with him, my right arm moving fast. There were two sounds, a smack and a flop. Rorty lay across the doorjamb, his black derby cocked over his right ear.

I dragged the limp flesh inside the room, locked the door and rode down the elevator.

* * * * *

The fog was rolling west off Twin Peaks when I turned into cobblestoned Cliffside Avenue.

Gravel crunched at my feet and wild, yellow poppies peeped from the weeds along the winding cinder-path. Number Fifteeneteen stood isolated on a gaunt hill. A billy-goat tethered to a stake browsed on stunted willow in the scabby yard.

I pressed my finger on the rusty doorbell and somewhere a steeple clock boomed six times. There was a shuffling sound as if heavy things were trying to walk lightly. A door creaked back, and I thought my arm was being jerked from its socket. Then an orange glare whirled through the top of my head. The glare began widening in bright orange circles, and then it became as small as a brown baked pea, and then blackness and emptiness and a fall into nothingness. . . .

THE man with the blue glasses was entirely bald. He had a black beard cut like a spade, and gray rolls of fat looping around his thick neck. His ears were mashed blobs of pulp and there was no cartilage in his flat nose. His thick body wedged into a broken-slatted chair and his lips moved.

I gathered my insides together. Beyond the buzzing in my ears I heard words coming through the black beard.

"One went. Now another comes."

I got up, wobbling like an hour-old colt.

A pale thin youth in a pea-green suit edged through the door. I'd seen him before, up on the balcony at the Café Mexico.

He had a girlish pouty mouth, wavy straw-colored hair. A lavender handkerchief

peeped from his coat pocket. He edged in, moving his hips like a ballet dancer.

I eased into a chair. The pale youth glanced at me through silky, yellow lashes, then turned to the bald man. "Van Reen, who is this fellow?"

The bald man growled. "This guy a friend of yours, Livehart?"

Livehart simpered. "Heavens, no. I never set eyes on the gentleman before."

I touched the soft, pulpy lump on the back of my neck. The touch shot pain down my spine.

A tall blonde swished in through a door. It was Diana Fitz-Hugh. She smiled at me. "I knew you'd not fail me." Then she saw the bump on my neck. She whirled on Van Reen. "You bungling ape!"

Livehart stamped his foot, minced daintily over to Van Reen, said petulantly, "Why didn't you tell me Diana had arrived?"

Van Reen answered sulkily: "I couldn't find the stone on her. And I had my own reasons for not telling you she was here." He turned to Diana. "This bozo a friend of yours?"

Diana nodded at me. "We're working together."

"Not so fast," cut in Livehart. "I doubt if we're in the mood for new talent at this stage of the game."

Van Reen poked a thick finger at Diana. "We don't trust you. We never did. No more than we trusted Trelease."

"Oh, cease," snapped Livehart. "Forget Trelease! He double-crossed me, also."

"He's through with all that," declared Diana, "but he picked an awkward time for it. Whoever killed him it was slick work, but the finger's on us all. As for me, I say a quick settlement and exit fast from Frisco."

Livehart pressed the tips of his fingers together. "Excellent. Let's pool together." He bowed to Diana. "Our stone is worth little without yours—"

Diana edged in: "And yours is worthless without mine."

Van Reen said: "Everybody's talking about the stones but where the blazes are they?" He got up from his chair, poured water from a pitcher. His lids flicked behind the blue glass. His shoulders were the widest I had ever seen on a man no bigger than five-feet-six.

I SAID to Van Reen: "I ought to kick your face in."

I felt Diana pressing me with her knee, warning me.

Van Reen made a rasping sound in his throat, went back to his chair.

Upon the table Livehart placed something that twinkled with green lights. It was twice as round as a man's thumbnail and as thick as any thumb.

"There's emerald number one," said Livehart. "I fished it off Trelease last night." He took out a .44 from his jacket. Twirling the trigger-guard he said: "And his gun, also. Trelease must have fired it once, before the knife got him."

The arms of Van Reen's chair creaked and his bald skull bent over the table. The blue glass scraped wood. "It's the male stone!" He gloated.

"Well then, Diana, show the other eye," said Livehart.

Diana's fingers were on my wrist. I felt irritable. My coat seemed tight and uncomfortable.

The gem winking up at me threw off shifting lights from dark green, to blue, to dark blue. Illumined in blue-green glow, a dancing figure was carved delicately on the face of the emerald.

"No, I haven't got it," said Diana, putting an arm around me and reaching inside my coat, "but I had someone bring it for me."

Her hand came out of my topcoat with something wrapped in white tissue. She peeled off the paper and threw the twin of the other emerald on the table.

The gem fell near its mate and Van Reen's big palm covered them both. "Now, we're rich," he said huskily. His lashes blinked blue and rapidly. "But in Brazil we'd be very rich, with these."

Livehart said, pointing toward me, "That's one *you* fumbled, Van."

"Let's forget Brazil," said Diana. "We can make a deal here and each one of us is well paid for his trouble."

"I'm for getting it over with and getting out of town tonight," declared Livehart, putting the gun in his pocket, "now that we've agreed to pool together."

Van Reen said, "How about him?" He jerked his head in my direction. "How does he figure?"

"I take care of him," said Diana. "We each get one-third of the pool. You, Livehart and myself. I take care of him out of my share."

Van Reen shook his big head. "I don't like it. Not at all. I say three's one less than four. He'd have to stick around until we got the money. That's one more to complicate things before we collect. I say he's out."

"And I say he's in—with me," insisted Diana. "You're not losing one penny! Neither is Livehart."

I licked the tip of a cigarette. Diana edged close to me. Her knee was warning me again.

Livehart said, "We three have been in on this from the beginning and we'll vote on whether he stays or don't stay. The majority decides."

"An excellent idea," said Van Reen, rubbing the emeralds between thick palms.

Diana shrugged acquiescently and her high heel pressed down on my foot.

"I vote he's out," announced Van Reen, his spade beard shoving forward.

"And I vote he's in," said Diana, pressing my arm.

Livehart stood with arms akimbo, his pale gray eyes studying my face. He teetered on the tips of his patent-leather pumps, took a cigarette from my pack on the table, lit up, blew out the match-flame daintily. He said to me: "You'd be too difficult." He quit teetering. "Even harder to handle than Trelease." His smile was friendly. "I'm so sorry but I'll have to vote you out."

"Looks like a packed jury," said Diana sourly, pressing hard on my foot.

"No," replied Livehart, "it wasn't. I was undecided when I suggested a vote. I considered the matter most carefully." He flashed the gun from his pocket. "You'll have to remove him, Van Reen."

"Nuts to you both," I said with fake bravado. Diana was breathing fast beside me.

LIVEHART tossed the gun into Van Reen's hand. "Okey-doke, Van."

I shoved my hand against Van Reen's bashed-in nose. "Stand up and I'll lam you through your brush," I said.

Livehart said, "Okay, Van, take him."

Van Reen's fingers fumbled at the trigger and then Diana snatched the gun from him. She whirled on me, covered me with the weapon. Her eyes were hard as purple agate. Her jaw was firm as she said: "Van, you'd fumble it. I got him in this jam and it's my job to finish it."

Her finger was on the trigger. Her eyes didn't waver, didn't soften. The gun was at my heart and it pointed too long.

My arm stabbed out and the gun was in my hand. Then something rolled over the table and knocked me to the floor.

Van Reen was on me. My face squashed in dusty carpet. My belly hugged steel and thick fingers dug into my throat.

A hand wrenched with terrific force at my wrist. Something locked about my body and my ribs were a wrack of agony.

I kicked up wildly, wriggled out of Van Reen's hug, my hand scraping up something hard and as thick as a thumb, and was up on my feet. Then something hit me back of the knees and I slipped, carrying Livehart down with me.

I heard Van Reen shouting, "Give me that rod, you b—!"

Something hard pressed into the palm of my left hand. I stood, whirled, saw Van Reen lumbering at me. I ran and leaped at the bald-headed man. My left foot kicked into puffy belly, my right hand smashed into bone, deep inside the spade beard. Van Reen keeled over as, running with my blow, I passed him and leaped through the glass as a bullet whistled past me.

Glass sprinkled above me. My feet hit shifting cinders and I slid slowly down, then more rapidly, until my knees flexed up and I flopped to a sitting position and let gravity and cinders carry me down. But I felt the emerald biting into my palm.

Clutching the gem in my hand, I skirted the thick embankment, turned at the foot of Cypress Street and climbed back up into the heart of San Francisco.

In a sleepy stationery store I went into a phone booth, and when the light came on, examined the emerald.

The carved figure on the gem occupied three-fourth of its surface. It was of a dancer, but only half the body was outlined. One leg with its ankle bangle, one arm, one side of the face with an eye and half a nose, and one side of a Hindu head dress—all fixed in the symbolic postures of a religious dance. Each detail of limb, feature and head dress was exquisitely minute and perfect, alive in its blue-green setting, yet lacking in completeness.

I placed the stone safely inside my pocket, came out of the booth, clinked a silver dollar on the counter.

"Coronas," I said. The clerk shoved a

box at me and I selected three long green-flecked cigars.

Outside I got a cab, rode up through Chinatown. In my Sutter Street office there was no mail.

It was one a.m. I slept on the office cot, rose at nine. I shaved, had coffee at the corner, then wended through hurrying morning workers down Mission Street.

CHAPTER II

"Green Eyes"

A LITTLE fellow with a limp, an unlighted stub in yellow teeth, shook my hand flabbily.

I took the stub from limpy's mouth, placed one of the green-flecked Coronas in its place. "Try this, Eddie."

Eddie mouthed the cigar around with brown wet lips and said, "Rorty's been around, asking if you'd been here."

I winked. "Say, Eddie, how about a looksee?"

Eddie grunted, licked his cigar. "Which one?"

"The guy they conked at the Café Mexico. Name's Trelease."

"Yeah, okay." Eddie chewed his cigar. "The doc ain't seen him yet. I ought to let the doc see him first, Kinsella."

"Sure. Okay. Thanks, Eddie," I said, slipping another of the green-flecked Coronas in his vest and following the limping man down a white-tiled corridor of the morgue into a large bare room.

There were two rubber-tired emergency operating tables by the window and something on the tables covered with sheets.

"I ain't ticketed them yet," said Eddie, "not until Judson gets to see them. Trelease is the one on the right. Make it snappy, Kinsella."

I raised the sheet. Trelease lay flat on his stomach. There was a jagged hole in his back, a little above the kidney, a hole made by a knife going in and coming out. There was a lot of red-brown pulpy matter around the wound.

Then I saw the other hole. It was very small. A crust of coagulated blood half-covered it.

"That'll be about it," I said, walking out with Eddie and placing the last Corona in his vest. I shook his limp hand and started out.

A stocky, gray-faced man, with a derby rolled over an ear, blocked the doorway.

"You're out, shamus," said Rorty. "Mac's revoking your license!"

I grinned. "You haven't told Mac anything yet. Hell, he don't get down till after noon." I pressed Rorty's arm, smiled winningly. "Listen to me! Then you can call me anything you want. You got a little hot-headed last night. I'm sorry, too—" A lot of bitterness came into my voice. "But I'm in it up to my neck now! I've been framed like a sucker and I'm seeing it through. The Trelease job and a lot more. Listen, what's official on Trelease?"

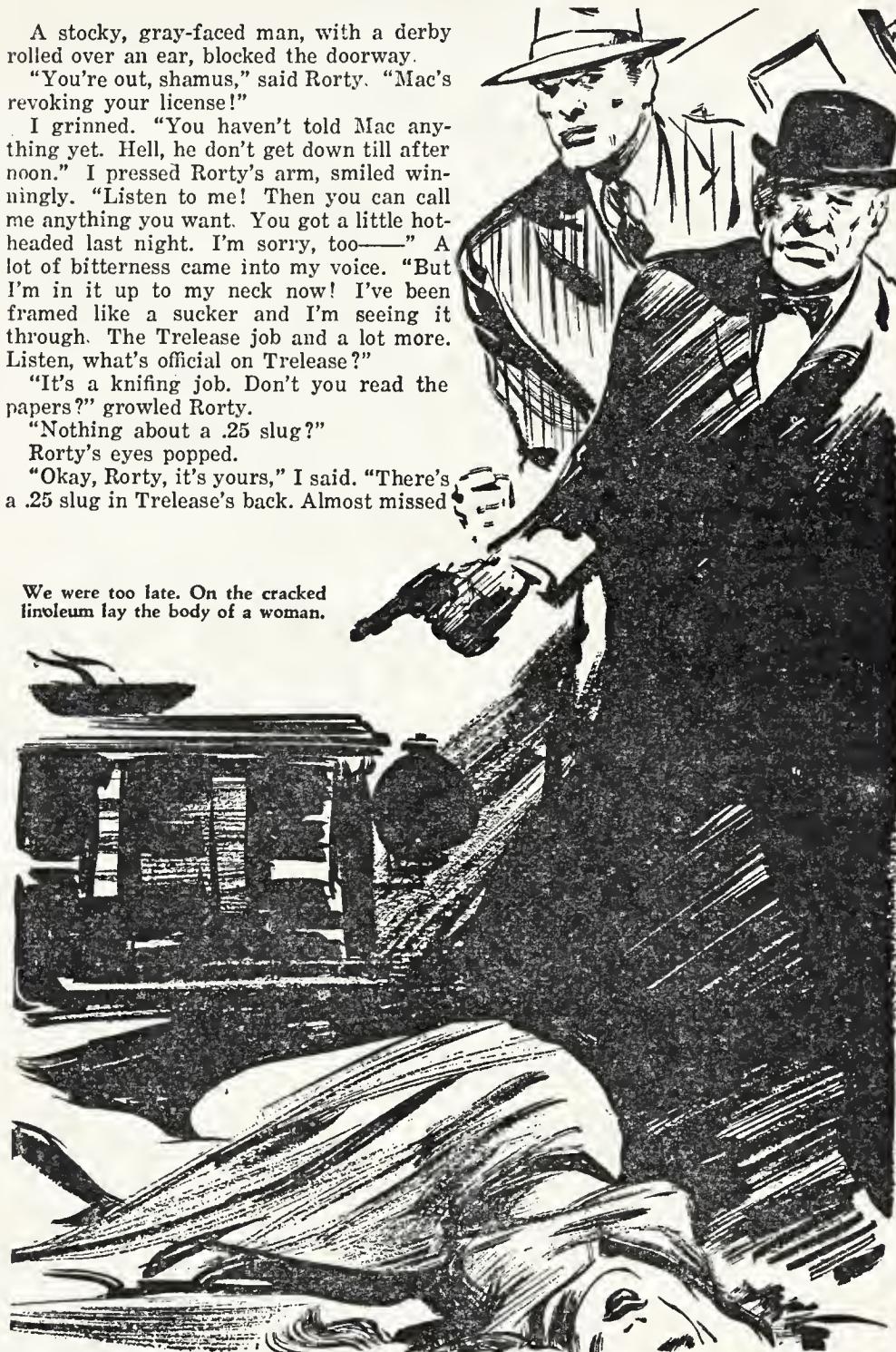
"It's a knifing job. Don't you read the papers?" growled Rorty.

"Nothing about a .25 slug?"

Rorty's eyes popped.

"Okay, Rorty, it's yours," I said. "There's a .25 slug in Trelease's back. Almost missed

We were too late. On the cracked linoleum lay the body of a woman.



it. Right on the edge of the knife wound. And Doc Judson ain't been around yet!"

"I don't get it!" exclaimed Rorty. "There was only one shot heard! It must have been from a .44. We found that bullet but it hadn't touched flesh."

"Work on the .25 angle," I said.

Rorty gripped my hand. "That's a break! They all muffed it. Call me," said Rorty, whirling around, "any time on *this*," and hurried off.

"Not officially," I called after him, grinning and saluting.

I drove to my office, locked the emerald in my safe.

OUTSIDE, I gave the driver my home address on Telegraph Hill and then dozed off until the cabbie touched my arm.

From the street, two flights of scabrous cement steps led up to a cross-barred glass door underneath a wooden sign. The sign read:

Apartments for Rent. All latest improvements. Inquire within.

There was no elevator and I walked up four flights of dark stairs to number forty-two, fitted a key into the door, went in, flipped my hat on a chair.

A woman's voice said, "Put your hands very high. You're covered."

My hands went up slowly.

A very dark-skinned, dark-haired woman in a very tight-fitting dress of dubonnet velvet came out of my bedroom, pointing a pearl-handled gun in long-nailed fingers. She had long, slanting black eyes, flat high cheekbones.

She kept moving forward as I flattened against the wall, hands high.

"I'm going to see if you have a gun," she said. "If you move, I shoot."

Her tongue showed its pointed tip between white teeth, giving her mouth a pink, feline look of mingled softness and sharpness.

She moved in like a dancer, without moving her body above the waist, and stopped an arm's length from me, her gun steady at my middle.

Her free hand moved rapidly through my clothes. Suddenly my hand came down fast on her gun arm but she stepped clear, wagged the gun at me teasingly.

"Please don't be silly," she said. "I might have shot you. You may sit down."

I slouched in a chair, licked an unlighted

Camel. She sat opposite me, slipped the gun inside her pocket.

"Why didn't you shoot me just then?" I asked.

"Because I want to be friends. I'm here to do business. I'll buy the eyes of Vishnu—those emeralds—from you."

I felt her out. "I've only one of the stones," I said.

"That's something to start with," she replied. "I'll still do business with you, of course you know."

"First, who are you?"

"I'm Wanda Medura."

"That don't register with me, Wanda."

"They know me."

"Who?"

"Van Reen and the pale boy—Andy Livehart. And the blonde Australian girl, too."

"How'd you find this place?"

"Well, I heard they were in Frisco and I got in touch with them. They told me you had the emeralds."

"I've only the one stone, I told you. None of them know where I live."

"I talked to them on the phone," Wanda said. "Diana had your card and the address was there. They asked me to be the go-between." Her eyes narrowed. "But I have a better idea."

"Your ideas ought to be better than the stories you make up," I said. "I don't carry cards."

HER laugh was silvery. "You're really proving very difficult, you know. But this is really how it happened. I read about Trelease in the paper and it told about the address found in his pocket—the West Dalton Street place, where Diana had an apartment. I went there. A man with a derby stopped me before I got in and he tried to browbeat me a bit. I let him have his way. He asked me what I knew about—he called you a bad name—a private investigator named Kinsella." She smiled. "I like the name."

"So?"

"Well, I had something then. This man took me to headquarters but I proved easily enough I wasn't at the café when Trelease got killed. My alibi was air tight so they let me go. I found you listed in the Classified phone directory. It was easy enough to trace you here."

"Maybe it was that way," I replied, "but why should they ask you to ferret out my

identity when Diana could have given you the information?"

Wanda shrugged. "Diana had her own reasons for keeping mum, I guess. Livehart was willing to set me in on their deal. I was to work on you. They lied to me though, saying you had both stones."

"Okay, sister," I said, "but tell me more about the emeralds—the Eyes of Vishnu."

"Vishnu," she said, "is the name of a Hindu deity, the supreme god in some of the religious systems. Those emeralds—the ones we're all interested in—have been known as the Eyes of Vishnu ever since the beginning of the Sixteenth Century. The stones were originally taken from the Cusco mines of Colombia and brought back to Europe by Cortez. They passed through various royal hands and somehow drifted to India, where one of the Mongol rajahs got them and had them carved."

"But why all the fuss about them?" I asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars is worth making some fuss about."

My eyes were skeptical.

"I suppose you don't believe it but I made it my business to find out all about them before getting mixed up in this affair. I'll explain. If you consider them as emeralds only, they are just average stones, but it's the cameo carvings on them, those two halves of figures, that make them priceless beyond anything that ever came out of India. There's a tradition about them there. There, you could name your own price for the emeralds. Of course, here in America, you'd have trouble getting anything near their real worth. However, a Brazilian, collector is interested in them, to such extent"—she brought out a sheaf of greenbacks from her dress—"that I'm prepared to pay ten thousand dollars for the two stones."

She placed money on her lap. "And, if you're willing you can earn it all yourself. But you mustn't lose sight of the fact that one stone without the other—is only a stone. It's the two together that mean everything—to one who knows their history."

I SAID, "It's beginning to shape up a little better."

"You said that *they* have the other emerald?" she asked.

"That's right."

She got up, swayed close to me. "Suppose you work for me?" She pressed the money into my hands. "Here's your retainer. When you get the other eye, I'll pay off."

I took the crisp bills in my hand, stacked them neatly in a pile, folded the pile double and flipped the money by my hat.

"I'll think about it," I said and moved close to her. There was a spicy, sharp tang to her hair. She looked at me with languorous eyes and then I pulled out the gun from her dress.

I shoved her roughly away and she stood facing the gun, leveled at her eyes.

"I don't like people with guns breaking into my place," I said.

"That is hardly fair," she answered. "I really had not expected those tactics of you." She smiled. "However, I am sorry to disappoint you. The gun is not loaded."

I broke the gun, revealing the empty chambers.

I skidded it across the floor, grinned at her sheepishly, and she looked up at me mockingly through slanted lids.

"Promise me you'll bring the Eyes of Vishnu together!"

"Maybe," I said, my hand beneath the arch of her back. "We'll talk about it afterward."

Her eyes did not smile with her lips.

"You'll go for the other eye?" she persisted.

"I don't like it," I said. "I don't even know where *they* are."

"At the Cliffside place."

"There'd be three against me," I replied. "I don't like the odds."

"No. I don't think so." She smiled. "Not three."

"There's Van Reen. There's Livehart. And there's the blonde."

"Diana wouldn't be with them. She hates them. She'd be on your side."

My smile was bitter. "I say the hell with it all. I don't trust you. No woman. Neither you nor Diana."

"So far," Wanda said dispassionately, "you've no reason to doubt my good faith. Now, what's Diana done to you?"

"I tried to help her," I said. "When the showdown came, she was ready to rub me out, with her own hands."

Wanda frowned.

"Yes," I went on, "she had the gun over my heart, her hand on the trigger—"

"But evidently she didn't shoot you. Why?" asked Wanda softly.

Some of the bitterness went out of my eyes.

"Why? Because I went for it and got the gun from her."

"You're so naive. Just like a schoolboy out to slay dragons. I've seen Diana with the pressure on, down in Mexico. Her fingers didn't fumble unless she had planned it that way."

I PACED the floor rapidly, growling. "Yeah, maybe. Maybe I'd like to believe you."

"Diana could have shot you like a dog, if it was in her heart."

I came over to her, gripped her shoulders. "Say, why are you giving her such a buildup?"

She smiled. "I just want you to bring the Eyes of Vishnu together. Then bring them to me. I will pay you ten thousand dollars for your trouble."

I picked up the wad of bills, counted the money. Three hundred and fifty dollars in tens and twenties.

"That's nowhere near ten grand."

"I'll manage to get the rest," she said.

I shoved the money in my pocket. Sea air was breezing through the open window. A plaid linen knitting bag, large and flat, lay on a chair.

I fingered the bag. "Say, how did you get in my place, anyway?"

"That was simple," she said. "I rented the vacant apartment above yours for a week's deposit, came down the fire-escape through your conveniently open window."

"And brought your knitting with you?"

She smiled, nodded. "Now what about the Eyes?"

I took out the money she had given me, flipped it on the chair. "Here's your dough. I'm not accepting any retainer. I'm playing it my way."

Her eyes showed no surprise.

"I'll cut you in on what I think your information is worth," I went on.

"All right, big-shot. You'll first have to cut yourself in," she replied mockingly. "Do you mind my waiting here until you bring back my little cut?" She took a lipstick from the bag, carmine her mouth.

"Make yourself right at home," I said, and slanted my hat over my hair.

"Good luck, Mr. Lone Wolf," she said.

I fingered the knob of the built-in wall safe, felt inside for my Luger. Then I remembered that I had taken the gun to the office. I locked the safe, turned and saw Wanda standing near the chair, grinned at her like a stubborn boy about to have his way against maternal guidance, and went out.

I went down to the public library and selected some books about India. One, by Pierre Loti. Another, by Rosita Forbes. In the third book, titled, *India of the Maharajahs*, by Captain Melville J. Osprey, I finally came across a passage that interested me very much.

Of the six hundred and seventy-five semi-independent states in India, Pathanala is an anomaly. For, in a land where sainthood is a profession, the State of Pathanala has no sadhus or holy men. The people are Jalis, an extreme sect of Brahminism, who eat no flesh, and who, at the coming of sundown, tie gauze strips across their mouths, lest unwittingly in the dark they swallow some winged insect. The Jalis are cunning workers in precious stones. The famous twin emeralds, The Eyes of Vishnu, are the epitome of their art, one of the finest examples of jewel-carving in existence. . . .

CHAPTER III

"Cheating Blues"

THERE was a chill to the air and a misty drizzle began drifting in from the Golden Gate as I turned Knob Corner and bumped into Rorty.

"How about a snort?" greeted the police detective.

"Make it two," I said, marching with him into the T. N. T. Bar.

"As per usual," said Rorty to the pock-faced bartender.

"Ditto," I said.

Two bottles of Three-Star Hennessy slid over wood.

"Here's to crime," said Rorty, tilting his bottle over his glass.

"And to women."

We had another drink.

"That was a break on the .25 slug, Kinsella, but damned if I could spot a print on that knife handle!"

"Try the blade," I said, "flake off the dried blood. Maybe something'll show."

Rorty ran to the phone, dialed a number. I poured another brandy while Rorty waited.

Rorty came back wearing a triumphant grin. He nodded to me and said to the bartender. "Let's all have a drink." We all did.

Pock-face said, "Have one on me, boys." And we had one on Pock-face. Then Rorty bought a round and I bought another round. Then I went outside with Rorty.

"Kinsella, I'm going to give you a break. We're going out to see a widow."

"I once knew a widow," I said.

"This one ain't been a widow long, only since last night."

"You're a fast worker, Rorty."

"Fast, my eye! She called up. She read about the Café Mexico knifing."

I said slowly, "Mrs. Captain Roger Trelease. Even money she's a blonde!"

"Three to two she's a brunette!"

"Okay, I'll take that bet," I said.

We got to Adelaide Street but it wasn't a street. It was a curved path sloping down from the Mission. A few straggling cottages, paint-flaked with weather-beaten shingles, hugged the hill.

As we stepped up the rickety porch of number twenty-nine, the fog came over Twin Peaks, riding in thick and milky, a huge clammy mouth-devouring light.

Rorty rang the bell but no answer came. I kicked on the door. Rorty kept his hand on the bell. I pounded fist on wood.

"All right, let her go," said Rorty.

He stepped back with me a few paces and then we ran forward together, let our shoulders heave into the door. There was the sound of rotten wood cracking, a bolt snapping away and the door opened enough to let us through.

WE STEPPED into silent darkness and I felt Rorty's gun against my thigh as we moved forward. My hand scraped a wall as we advanced knee to knee. My fingers felt the switch.

"There's light here," I whispered.

"Glim it on," breathed Rorty.

The light clicked on. Across the dingy pattern of twined roses on the cracked linoleum lay the body of a woman. She was lying in her nighttown and she had the figure of a nymph.

Her hair drifted below her knees, luxuriant and prematurely gray.

There were two red marks on her wrist, where a little swelling seemed to have started. I showed the marks to Rorty, then listened at her heart.

We were too late.

We went outside through a wall of fog. Under a feeble lamplight at the corner of Adelaide and Mission, Rorty showed a blue-coat his badge. They talked a while. The cop saluted and left us and Rorty talked to headquarters from a police box.

Then we walked back to the T. N. T. We had a drink and Rorty remarked: "Gray-haired dames with shapes like that get under my skin."

"Yeah, they don't come any better," I agreed, saluted and marched through the door.

I came out of warm air into a damp blanket of fog. A trolley clanged and the street-car loomed into view. I rode as far as Cliffside Avenue.

I got off the trolley, put my hand where my shoulder-holster should have been riding. "—the gun!" I exclaimed. But I was drunk enough to think I could ride along with blind luck and I was itchy to see the blonde Diana again.

I moved forward through a wall of fog until I heard the goat munching. Then I inched ahead very slowly until my ankle scraped wood. I tiptoed up the porch steps.

A light stabbed my face. Black-bearded Van Reen stood in the doorway, holding a flashlight in one hand, cradling a kitten in the other.

"Welcome, friend!" boomed Van Reen. "Miss Wanda has a persuasive tongue, I dare say." He dragged me though the door before I could protest, led me into a room and sat me down across from him.

He scratched the kitten's neck. "You have the stone with you, my friend?"

"Not on my person. But I can procure it quickly if the consideration is attractive."

"How attractive?"

"Ten thousand dollars cash."

Van Reen frowned. "I'm afraid you overestimate your assets. The stone you have is an imitation. Let me explain."

He took from his pocket the carved emerald—the mate of the one in my safe—placed it on the table. "This one is genuine. Notice how deep the outline of the figure is etched. On your stone the grooves are shallower. However, I am willing to purchase it, from you for one thousand dollars cash."

"You're lying about that other emerald," I replied. "I showed it to a very interested party and they asserted it was genuine."

"Who was that party?" asked Van Reen, looking puzzled. "Surely not our mutual friend Wanda?" The kitten flicked a paw at the green gem lying on the table.

"That is immaterial. If you'll show me ten grand in the hand I'll produce the other emerald."

A gun edged through the door. Following the gun came a thin, pale youth in a pea-green suit. Livehart said gleefully: "Okay, boys, up with meat hooks!"

Van Reen reached. My hands went up and Livehart moved toward us noiselessly, simpered: "You scallywags. Conniving rascals."

He reached his free hand for the emerald and I threw the kitten in his face. He screamed and his gun went off. Then another gun fired from the doorway. Livehart hit the floor, scarlet dripping from his arm.

DIANA came running to me. "Grab the punk's gun and get out fast."

I was cold sober now and I made a dive for the gun on the floor. Van Reen's skull hit me on the third vertebrae. I fell down with him and he got his hands around my throat. Some knee-work in his groin got me free.

I jumped up. Diana yelled: "I've got the stone!" We got out of there fast.

In the cab I said to her: "I was a fool for ever doubting you."

She said: "I had to play it that way yesterday or Van Reen would have killed you. Now we cash in. I know someone who will give us ten grand for the emeralds—and no haggling."

"Who? This girl Wanda?"

"Not her," said Diana. "You saw her, then? Some way she must have found out where you lived. I knew she had contacted Van Reen and Livehart. What made you go back to the Cliffside place?"

"Well, Wanda persuaded me you'd been bluffing when you held the gun on me yesterday and I wanted to believe that. I went back because I figured you were in trouble."

"And not because you'd made a deal with Wanda?"

"She tried to do business with me," I grinned. "But I decided to play it without her. She also told me something of the history of those emeralds. I wonder how you got mixed up in it?"

Diana's eyes were somber. "Sometimes I wish I never had. I started in Chile. I'd gotten my hands on the emeralds—legitimately enough, in spite of what the others may claim. I knew their worth. There is a man in Rio who would pay fifty thousand to get them, but I couldn't get to Brazil then. Van Reen and Livehart found out I had the emeralds and kept dogging me night and day while I was in Chile. I went by boat to Panama and those two followed me. The Medura girl—this Wanda—edged into the picture then."

"How come?" I wanted to know.

"She's Brazilian, you know. Van Reen and Livehart got to her and she made things nasty for me. I got a ship out of Panama secretly one night. I had the emeralds. Just as the ship sailed, they got on, those three. Van Reen, Livehart and Wanda. That was three-to-one against me."

"How does Trelease fit in?"

"Captain Trelease was on board, an ex-captain of British cavalry. I needed help so I told him my story. Between us we managed to keep those three away from the stones. Then at Acapulco another came aboard, the Portuguese Gomez. He was after the emeralds too. He became friendly with the other three and one night this Gomez tried to break into my cabin. Captain Trelease almost killed him. When the boat reached San Pedro, Gomez was kicked off the ship." Her voice broke. "When our ship docked at Frisco, Trelease revealed his true colors. He tricked me out of one of the emeralds. We parted. I didn't see him again until last night in the Café Mexico."

"Did you know Trelease had a wife living here?" I asked.

"I'd heard about that," Diana replied, looking away.

We got out of the cab near my office and I got the other emerald from my safe.

I said: "Tomorrow we'll see your party and you'll get your money and pay me off."

She smiled. "It's a fifty-fifty split if that's agreeable. But I think the business should be settled this afternoon."

IN THE lobby of the Jefferson House I slouched in the depths of an easy chair, waiting while she dialed, inside a booth. My head nodded drowsily.

I dreamed there was a hill and I was somehow inside the hill and a door shut

against me so that I could not get out, and I put my shoulder to the door and pushed.

When I woke up my hands were pushing an arm of the chair and Diana was no longer inside the booth. I heard heels clicking down a corridor, heard a door open and slam.

I sprang up, felt in my pocket for the emeralds. They were gone.

I raced out of the lobby. Three leaps and I was out on the curb. A cab door closed on a swing of mink coat.

The car screeched into gear. My feet pounded on pavement, over asphalt. I caught up to the cab as it slackened around a corner.

I got a hold on the rear trunk-rack and my feet scraped over hot macadam, and then my feet were clear and I raised up, doing a half hand-stand, and got my feet on the metal rack, and stood up and leaned against the back of the swaying cab.

It was a fast and dizzy ride along the north side of Golden Gate Park. Down a narrow side street the car suddenly skidded and jammed to a stop.

I stepped down to the street, saw Diana pay off the driver. The car roared away. She limped as she turned to a house that stood lonely on a banked lawn, tip-tapped up wooden steps. Then I was beside her.

I gave her two hard backhand slaps, grabbed the purse from under her arm. "Give me those stones, you cheat!"

She snatched for her purse, then gasped: "It's you, Kin! Oh, you frightened me!"

I tore the purse away from her, ripped it open, found the emeralds. I pocketed the stones, threw the purse in her face. She hung on to my arm, crying: "You don't understand, I was going to—"

I tore her hands away, shoving her head down and she slipped, clung to my leg. I kicked free of her, rasped: "Get going!" and ran down the banked lawn.

At the corner I turned and saw her limping down steps.

A cab droned by and I got in.

I WAS pretty drunk when I turned the key in my apartment door. Wanda sprang up from a chair to help me across the sill. I shook her off, lurched to the wall-safe, locked up the emeralds. I lurched back to the daybed, lay down.

Wanda sat beside me and I looked at her morosely. "The hell with women!" I said



I got a hold on the rear trunk-rack, for the ride.

churlishly, turned over on my side and went to sleep. . . .

Suddenly I was awake in darkness, and cold sober. I slid my head under the coverlet and worked forward under it in a sliding, wriggling motion and then was off the couch as I heard clicking sounds. Wanda was turning the knob of my safe.

I ran to her, shoved her brutally against the wall, knocked her to the floor. My hand scraped plaster and I punched on the light.

She was on her knees, looking up at me with slanted black eyes.

Over on the daybed, when I had just been sleeping, a grayish-black, wriggling thing reared up with a flat head above my pillow and struck.

I retched violently. When I raised my head, Wanda had moved to the bed, holding a Y-shaped stick in her left hand and the familiar flat linen bag in the other.

She flipped the bag on the bed. The snake reared and struck at the stick and its fangs caught in the wool of the blanket. The Y-crotch of the stick came down with light-

ning speed on the snake's back. Wanda's right hand flicked down. It held the squirming reptile back of the head. She let it drop in the open bag, closed the bag flap and stood facing me.

Her voice was a hissing whisper. "It must have escaped," she said.

She picked up the bag and edged backward slowly. My eyes were red rims moving forward as she went back. I opened the door and let her go out, as one lets pass some foul monstrosity, not daring to touch it.

I sat down on the bed, head sagging over knees. The breeze ruffling in through the window began to cool the dampness under my arms.

Something rattled in my coat pocket. I pulled out the paper, recognized the swift, angular script:

Kin:

I contacted my man and he told me to come alone. Besides, I'm afraid—for you. There's a tradition that harm must come to whoever has the Eyes of Vishnu. I must get rid of them tonight. I go there now. Wait for me here. Do not follow me for it will be bad luck. I will come back at once—as soon as I have seen him—with the money.

Diana

I realized she had written the note while I was dozing in the hotel lobby.

I crushed the paper, let it fall. Then I walked to the safe. The combination hadn't been cracked.

I shivered as I went to my bedroom and bolted the window. The thought of sleeping in my bed made me sick. I closed the bedroom door and locked it, lay down in the hallway without undressing.

CHAPTER IV

"Man with a Tie"

WHEN I got up, the sun was filtering through the window shade. I shaved, bathed, and got the emeralds out of the safe, then went out.

I went to the hotel where Diana had phoned from the previous night. There was no message for me there. Then, knowing it was a foolish thing to do, I got a cab and drove to Diana's West Dalton Street address.

There I inquired for her, referring to her as "Miss Lane"—the name she had assumed. The landlady informed me she had left.

Dispiritedly I stood at the curb. A cab angled over and a head leaned out. "Taxi, mister?"

I walked like an automaton to the car. The door swung open.

I had a foot inside. Something hard poked my spine.

"Reach, please! Very high!" The voice was shrill and foreign and it came from inside the car.

My foot came off the step, my hands went up, an emerald in each fist, cupped by a thumb and a palm. A man with a twitching nose stepped out of the cab. Behind me, another man with a gun at my back breathed heavily.

Twitchy Nose moved a skinny hand through my pockets. He had black, greasy hair falling under a broad black hat, a black topcoat, black dance slippers on his small feet.

He said to me, "Step inside, please. No harm will befall you if you behave."

The gun at my back prodded me forward. "You may put your hands down," piped Twitchy Nose.

My hands slid down and I leaned close to him, and the emeralds slipped from my palms into the pockets of his topcoat. An emerald went in under each flap of the side pockets.

I got in the front seat, Twitchy Nose on one side, a big dark hulk of a man on his other side.

"All right, Pedro," said Twitchy Nose. The big man took the wheel. He was dark as an Indian. He shifted into gear and drove with one hand. His other hand had a gun next to my ribs. I leaned back. Twitchy Nose had another gun at the base of my skull.

They took me to an ugly old house, one of those wooden monstrosities that the earthquake and fire of 1906 had forgotten to swallow up.

I marched between Twitchy Nose and the big Indian and guns touched me on two sides.

We went into an enormous room, completely bare except for three rickety chairs. On one side was a wormy pine door that led off somewhere.

Twitchy Nose dismissed the Indian Pedro

with a curve of thumb and Petro went through the door.

There was a damp chill in the room; the place was unheated.

Twitchy Nose removed his hat. His greasy hair flopped down over his ears. "You may stand or sit down, just as you wish," he said to me in a high singsong voice, bowing, "but first let me introduce myself. I am Francisco Gomez, a man with ten thousand dollars to hand over in exchange for two small mementos. Does that mean anything to you?" Gomez took off his coat, folded it neatly on the back of a chair, waiting for my answer.

I TOOK a chair, teetered in it, yawned. "Ah, yes, the tall blonde girl was telling me about you."

Gomez smiled. "You will please disrobe. I must see if you secret the Eyes of Vishnu. You will be shot if you refuse."

I undressed and Gomez examined my garments. I put on my clothes and Gomez, tapping my knee confidentially, said: "Just as I expected, Mr. Kinsella—your name, of course, is known to me—I have no desire to see you come to an unfortunate end and I'm sure you'll cooperate with me when you hear my story."

I stifled a yawn, lit a cigarette.

"Those emeralds," continued Gomez, "the Eyes of Vishnu, rightly belong to the Maharajah of Pathanala, my employer. They are the eyes of the statue of the god that rests in the temple of the Maharajah and that statue is the symbol of his authority. Without the eyes the symbol becomes meaningless—an empty shell. With the emerald eyes restored, his people know the gods are with him. I appeal to you—the happiness of ten million humans depends on their return. And for your trouble—and no questions asked—I am ready at once to pay you ten thousand dollars—and to send to you from India a similar sum."

"Let's see the money," I drawled. "Ten thousand now and the hell with later. That's okay, and you'll get your stones."

Gomez took out a purse and counted a lot of money on his knee, took a checkbook and pen from his pocket and scratched off a check, laid the pen on a chair. "Here is two thousand cash and my check for the rest."

I took the check, tore it across twice, let the pieces fall. "No checks. All dough. If there's not ten grand in cash, we don't talk

turkey. Ten grand is what I said—and not a penny less."

Gomez sighed. "You are very impractical. You do not expect me to carry so much cash. The check is absolutely good."

"No ten grand, no stones."

Gomez smoothed a skinny hand over his hip. His nose twitched more violently than ever.

"And if you shoot me," I bluffed, "you'll never find the Eyes of Vishnu."

Gomez pocketed his money. He smiled, then clapped his hands loudly. Indian Pedro came through the door, carrying a thonged blackjack. Gomez took out his gun, weighed it in his thin hand. He nodded to Pedro.

Pedro shuffled toward me, his little eyes gleaming. He said: "The works, master?"

Gomez nodded.

Pedro grinned, rolling his bludgeon between horny palms.

A THIN, pale youth wearing a bandage over his left arm stepped through a curtain. Livehart surveyed the tableau with a look of pained boredom. He flicked a wrist at Pedro: "Outside, silly!"

Pedro looked sheepishly at Gomez, who crooked his thumb. Pedro went out.

Gomez glanced at Livehart like a schoolboy caught in the middle of a prank. Livehart smiled at me. "Such an unpredictable fellow you are! Imagine meeting you here. But well met, say I. We three can come to terms with profit for all."

Through the closed door came the sound of scuffling and Gomez, leaving his coat over the chair, ran into the adjoining room.

Livehart placed a finger over his pouty mouth. "It's all fixed for a getaway. Come with me."

"What's the angle?" I asked.

"You have the emeralds?"

I put on Gomez' coat, slid my hands into the pockets. "I have the stones," I said. "They are for sale for ten thousand dollars."

Livehart's silky lashes fluttered. "Come with me to Mexico City. There is a man there who will pay us five times ten grand for the stones. I'll get rid of Gomez."

"The hell with Mexico City. I'll do business now. Show me ten grand."

"You won't go with me to Mexico?"

"Nuts to Mexico."

"All right, hot shot, play it alone and you're a dead gee."

There was the sound of wood cracking and through the battered-down door swung bearded Van Reen with Gomez and Pedro hanging on to his arms.

I started to back away through the curtain. Livehart shrieked: "Van, stop him, he's running off with the stones!"

Now in the doorway, the tableau changed. Three hands tugged at three hips and a gun sounded.

Big Pedro slid to the floor. He slid slowly, red bubbling from his mouth. His gun skidded near me and Livehart fell on it, came up fast and fired twice at me.

The bullets went too far left. Van Reen slumped to the floor, put a hand over his belly as red rivulets began trickling through his thick fingers.

A gun came sliding slowly at my foot and I grabbed it fast, stood up with my back to the curtain, pointing steel. Livehart whirled around, his gun wagging. Gomez' gun was out. The guns formed the points of a triangle. Nobody fired.

Gomez spoke in his high shrill voice: "Enough of death! We three can—"

A blond woman stepped in through the curtain back of me, pointing a pearl-handled .38. She said silkily: "Hold it, boys. I'm top gun here."

"Shoot the redhead, Diana," shouted Livehart. "He's got the emeralds on him!"

"Kin, step back through the curtain with me," said Diana. "I've got them covered."

I snatched up Gomez' pen from the table, moved back with Diana. Livehart's gun fired. Gomez fell to the floor, fired twice from a prone position. Livehart pressed his trigger and the hammer clicked, but no other sound came. Livehart started crawling through the door. Gomez was up on one knee, blood streaming from an arm. I backed out of the room with the blonde.

She led me down shaky steps to a cellar smelling of cheap wine, and cobwebs. We stepped through a broken window, fresh air fanned us. Outside, we got a cab.

WE MADE our explanations. I said to her: "I didn't read your note until I'd returned to my apartment."

"I knew you hadn't understood," she replied. "So last night I followed you in a cab, saw you enter your place. I parked on the corner, waited. When Wanda came out I sensed danger for you. A car drove up as Wanda reached a crossing and she talked to

the driver. The driver of the car was Gomez. Wanda departed. Gomez in his car must have hung around nearby, because when you came out he started trailing you."

"So?"

"Then I figured the pay-off would be soon. I knew Gomez' hangout and parked near it, waiting. I saw Gomez and the Indian go in with you. Livehart must have been waiting inside for them. I stayed around, wondering what to do, but when Van Reen barged in I figured I might as well be in on the showdown."

By this time we were out of the cab and opening a new door.

The room was dingy and cluttered.

Mr. Aaron Elo had a glistening nose that curved in a tremendous sweep to meet his chin, flabby dewlaps, a mouth full of gold teeth. He was a hunchback in a greasy dressing-gown and his weasel-brown eyes glittered when Diana put the two emeralds on his counter.

Mr. Elo's nervous fingers couldn't stop fondling them. "At last!" He chuckled. "After all these years—the Eyes of Vishnu!"

"Step on it, uncle," I said, running my fingers through Diana's purse.

"Hurry!" said Diana, "The money! The ten thousand dollars you promised me!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Elo, "that was yesterday's promise. Today is today." He took out a wad of money from his dressing-gown. "Five thousand is all I can afford to pay."

"Kin, shall we take it?" asked Diana. "You're entitled to half. You faced all the guns."

"We'll take five grand and get out fast," I said.

Mr. Elo's dirty thumb flicked rapidly. "And five thousand dollars," he chanted, handing me the money, bowing and smiling.

Mr. Elo's smile became a leer, a grimace. Only then did I hear the shot. I grabbed Diana's arm and we dived under the desk.

Mr. Elo leaned on the table, still grimacing. It was a red grimace. A gun slid into his hand from somewhere. Dark-skinned Wanda Medura came running in through the bric-a-brac with a blazing gun.

Mr. Elo's gun coughed gently. The bullet made a sound like chewing gum snapping. Wanda fell. She raised a head that had only one eye. Then the head dropped down.

Mr. Elo kept coughing for a few seconds,

as he crawled to the table. Then he didn't move at all.

Diana and I went out of there with the five thousand dollars. We left the Eyes of Vishnu on Mr. Elo's counter.

AFTER I locked my twenty-five hundred dollars in the safe, the phone rang. I took up the receiver, winking at sleepy-eyed Diana curled comfortably on my office couch. I heard Rorty's voice at the other end.

"Yes, the prints on the fountain pen match up with the prints on the knife blade. And as you thought, Mrs. Trelease did die of snake bite. Cobra venom."

"Okay."

"Anything new, Kin?"

"There's been a little lead passed out—here and there," I said. "In a dump on Tele-

Over on the daybed, where I had just been sleeping, a greyish-black, wriggling thing reared a flat head above us and struck.



graph Hill an Indian and a bald man with a beard lie dead. In the pawnshop of Mr. Aaron Elo, a girl and the proprietor stopped some bullets. I'll see you later and explain." I hung up, smiled at Diana.

"That about makes everything click," I said to her. "From what I gathered myself

and what was told to me, I figure it this way: Gomez got kicked off your ship at San Pedro, as you said, and came to Frisco ahead of you and the others. Then when Livehart and Wanda arrived here he contacted them. He bargained with each of them. When he heard that Trelease had one of the stones, he had Livehart inveigle Trelease to go with him to the Café Mexico."

The sleep went out of Diana's eyes.

I went on: "Then Gomez followed Trelease to the café and knifed him—I'll explain that later in more detail. Livehart, in the confusion, as prearranged, got the stone from Trelease. But instead of playing square with Gomez, Livehart teamed up with Van Reen. Gomez then worked with Wanda and she tipped him off to my place, of course. But in the meantime, Livehart, desperate because I now had both stones, went back to Gomez hoping to make a new deal with him. Previous to Wanda's visit to me, Wanda had spotted Trelease's home. Hoping to find the stone Trelease had secreted in his house, she had to do away with Mrs. Trelease to carry out her search unmolested. Wanda carried death around in her knitting bag and the damned thing almost got me!"

Diana's eyes were weary, red-rimmed.

"Why do you say Gomez killed Trelease?" she asked.

"He had a hand in it, anyway," I replied. "He was an egomaniac killer with a tic."

"What's a tic?" she asked.

"A popular definition would be a nervous physical mannerism, characterized by a twitching or flexing of the features, the eyes, or the limbs. Gomez' tic was easily recognizable: that nervous flaring of the nostrils that gave him the appearance of snuffling as if he had a cold. I remembered the apparent drunk that was near Trelease's table up in the balcony at the Café Mexico when it happened. The drunk had a tic and wasn't really a drunk. The tic was a nose twitch and the phony drunk was Gomez. Yes, the funny Charlie Chaplin mustache get-up was right in line with Gomez' psychological slants. He liked to play in fantastic roles—even with death hovering about. No one but a nut would act that way and play around with me in the role of a fake agent of a non-existent maharajah."

"But—?"

"But what clinches the whole matter as far as Gomez is concerned is the fact that

the fingerprints on the knife-blade—when he killed he must have flipped the knife as one flips a knife when playing mumblety-peg—I say the fingerprints on the knife-blade match the fingerprints on a fountain pen I swiped from him. The tic suggested the association. The prints prove I was correct."

"But there was a shot heard at the time Trelease was killed," said Diana.

I nodded. "I distinctly remember Trelease pitching forward *before* the shot was heard. The shot came out of his own gun and was fired by Trelease's own hand—after he was knifed—and *after the .25 slug went into his back*."

Diana paled. "Was Trelease shot, too?"

"Of course. I thought I'd told you. The question is: was the bullet or the knife the fatal instrument?"

"And who used the .25 on Trelease?" She breathed.

"Why, it must have been you, Diana," I said, not letting her slip off the couch.

SHE clung to me, weeping.

"Whether your shot came before or after the knife flip, I don't know," I said. "But the shot came from a gun you had in or under your purse. A .25 is small and your flat purse was just the thing to hide it. You must have shot from under it, as I didn't find a bullet-hole in your purse. You might have used a silencer, slipped the gun inside the purse after you fired. The angle of entrance showed in the bullet-hole in the body, but I guess you had a damned good reason for doing it."

"Yes! Yes!" she said passionately, her eyes dry. "He tricked me out of one of the stones! I wanted to get it back!"

"No," I said gently. "That was too desperate a way to retrieve the stone, especially from where you sat. You shot him because he'd betrayed you, betrayed you in the only way a man can betray a woman. He married you on board ship—yes, I saw the papers in your purse—for some peculiar reason you women never do destroy those sentimental souvenirs. He married you when he already had a wife here in Frisco. He married you to gain your confidence and steal the gems."

"I shot him," she hardly whispered, "but I regret it bitterly. And now I'll never know whether it was Gomez' knife or my bullet that killed him."

"Only Providence can answer that."

She clung to me desperately. "Kin! Kin!
Don't leave me now! Don't put me aside!"

The phone jangled. I ran to it. A voice sounded doubly shrill over the wire, exulting, triumphant.

"I've beat you all—all of you!" shouted Gomez. A mixture of spite and glee was in his tones. "I've got the Eyes of Vishnu! I alone have got them. I'm in my stateroom and sailing to South America in ten minutes!"

And then, over the wire, I heard a sound like a finger going into a glove, and then two louder sounds in rapid succession, and then faintly over the wire, a wailing pipe of a voice, Gomez' voice again: "Help! I'm dying, dying—"

I hung up. "What was that?" asked Diana. "That noise like fire-crackers popping?"

"That must have been Livehart's hand," I said. "Gomez is dead."

Diana's face was ghastly white. She bit her lip. Blood showed at her mouth. "Let

us get out of here," she said.

I took her hand as the phone rang again.

"Yes," I said wearily.

"It's Rorty."

"The man who knifed Trelease," I said, "is lying in his stateroom on a boat sailing for South America in ten minutes. You can catch that boat before it goes through the Gate, if you hurry."

"What about the .25 slug?" asked Rorty.

"That must have been one he'd been carrying around for years. Sort of a souvenir. I wouldn't worry about it," I said and hung up.

I went outside with Diana. The sun was slanting golden arrows from a blue sky as we crossed Sutter Street. In the middle of traffic, I asked her: "Do you know how to cook?"

She smiled at me happily. "Yes."

"That's swell. Better get yourself an honest job, baby, and forget the rackets."

A whistle shrieked the all-clear. A trolley clanged at my foot and I swung aboard. I never saw Diana again.

**STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY
THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933,
AND JULY 2, 1946**

Of PRIVATE DETECTIVE published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1947.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared M. R. Bindamin, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of PRIVATE DETECTIVE and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Frank Armer, 125 E. 46th St., New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, M. R. Bindamin, 125 E. 46th St., New York 17, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stocks. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Trojan Magazines, Inc., 125 E. 46 St., New York 17, N. Y.; Michael Estrow, 114 E. 47th St., New York 17, N. Y.; Frank Armer, 125 E. 46 St., New York 17, N. Y.; Janet DePinna Armer, 125 E. 46 St., New York 17, N. Y.; Anna Estrow, 114 E. 47 St., New York 17, N. Y.; Stanley Estrow, 527 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which the stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date above is
(This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) M. R. Bindamin
(Signature of editor)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 8th day of October, 1947.

[Seal]

(Signed) Alfred B. Yaff
(My commission expires March 30, 1948)

The power of Socrates hypnotized this private eye into agreeing to do all he could to prove innocent a killer who had already confessed to one murder, and this prize blunder was not a thing to be compared to the next

Bright Light Kill



I said, "You're wrong. The bump you heard is probably the plaster, falling off inside of the house, but it did not come from outside."

SOCRATES BEAN said, "It's here somewhere. It has to be. A fine investigator you are, if you can't find a thing like this!"

He was standing on the paint-blistered, sagging old veranda, watching while I hunted around the front yard with a flash-

light. Socrates Bean has a million dollars, but his front yard has a million weeds, too. I was kicking around in a regular hayfield down there, up to my hips in the timothy and ragweed.

"It's here!" he fretted. "I distinctly heard the bump when it landed."

By DALE CLARK

Illustrated by Newton Alfred



But it wasn't there. I gave up, aimed the flashlight at my employer. The light splashed onto probably the homeliest face in creation—gnarled, knotty, and knobby. He couldn't help having a phizz like a Walt Disney dwarf, of course. He'd picked out the lop-eared bowtie under his chin, though.

And the moth-eaten old ruin of a velvet-collared smoking jacket, he'd dragged out of an attic trunk.

I said, "You're wrong, Mr. Bean. The bump you heard was probably the plaster falling off inside the house." Because that's the kind of a house this one was. It was one of those fine old family mansions, as big as an average county courthouse, with cupolas on the roof and iron balconies hedging in the diamond-paned upstairs windows. But he'd had me tack down pieces of tin where the roof leaked, and the rusty ironwork had leaked brown zebra-stripes down the paint-peeling walls.

Socrates Bean scowled at me. "Nonsense, McKane! The sound I heard was definitely out here on the porch and it was—"

"Oh-oh!" A floorboard was gone, so I'd aimed the flashlight down, in order not to step in the hole.

That's how I saw it. I went down on one knee, reached my arm down into the hole, and I brought up the newspaper.

That's what all the excitement had been about.

Socrates Bean said triumphantly, "I told you I heard the newsboy throw it up onto the veranda!"

"Yeah, and I told you it wasn't out there in the yard!" I argued back.

Bean snatched the paper from me and headed in through the ponderous carved oak doorway, plunged along fifty feet of moth-riddled hallway carpet, into his old-fashioned study that smelled of ancient books, leather, and coal smoke. The coal-smoke smell came from a badly drawing fire in the hearth.

Socrates Bean peeled the paper into two sections, tossed me the front page part and hustled over to the fireplace with his own, back half.

I TOOK one look at the headlines. "Hey, they got the guy that killed the Warmsett girl!"

Bean didn't answer. He had his ugly pan hidden behind the editorial page.

"It says the killer walked into police headquarters this afternoon and surrendered of his own accord," I commented.

Socrates Bean's reply was, "Dammit, they didn't print my letter!"

He must have been the only human being in the city who'd managed to remain deaf, blind, and oblivious to the Mary Warmsett

murder mystery. The manhunt had been going on for a week now, but Bean was all wrapped up in a squabble with his fellow millionaires along Mimosa Drive. The neighbors had complained to the City Council, claiming Bean ought to be forced to cut down his front-yard weeds and paint the building. The place was an eyesore, they said, that detracted from their property values.

Socrates Bean had written a long letter to the newspaper, explaining he'd spend thousands for legal fees but not one cent for repairs. He said he was keeping the house the way it was, as a symbol. It showed what happened to property when the owner was wrongfully imprisoned in the penitentiary for twenty years. He reminded the newspaper that he'd been sent up for a homicide he hadn't committed. He'd served twenty years before the actual criminal made a deathbed confession—and now that he'd been released, Socrates Bean was devoting his lifetime and his money to preventing similar miscarriages of justice.

He hurled his half of the newspaper into the fire and he glowered at me. "It's censorship, McKane! They won't print my side of the story! But I'll lick 'em, anyway! I won't cut down one weed or spread one inch of paint. I won't, because as long as I don't, people are going to talk about this house, and that means they're going to remember innocent men are sometimes wrongfully convicted by their cops and judges and juries!"

He meant every word of it. Nobody could know that better than I, because over a year ago, I'd gone to work for Socrates Bean as his special investigator.

He'd dig up some case where he figured an innocent suspect was taking a bum rap from the law and it was my job to go out and dig up evidence to prove that suspect was innocent.

As a matter of fact, in a couple of cases it'd really worked out that way. Yes, a couple of times we'd saved innocent persons from a practically certain jolt in the chair.

So you see, Socrates Bean's ideas weren't completely screwy. I'd say, only about half-so. He wasn't insane but he was certainly eccentric from the long years he'd spent brooding in the Big House. Nobody could know better than I how eccentric he was because I'd put in over a year listening to him discuss this subject of miscarried justice.

Any time he got started, he was good for an all-evening lecture on over-anxious cops, politically ambitious prosecutors, and the legal aspects of sheer circumstantial evidence.

I'd heard it a dozen times before and I wanted to head it off tonight.

I said: "Sure, but right now's a poor time to expect the paper to print a letter like yours. This town right at present isn't interested in anything but seeing Mary Warmsett's killer caught. No doubt it'll all cool off in a few days, since this man Lippy Creel has come clean. You send the paper another letter next week and—"

Socrates Bean's voice exploded at me. "Creel? Mary Warmsett's killer? What are you talking about?"

"It's all over the front page, Mr. Bean. This guy Creel gave himself up to the cops today. Judging by his picture, he'd certainly be a tough customer to meet up a dark alley—"

Bean was beside me, snatching the news sheet from my fingers. He took one look at the picture.

He said, "It's preposterous! This man is innocent! He couldn't possibly have killed that unfortunate young woman. Creel's as innocent as you or I!"

I STARED at Socrates Bean's face. It was flushed and excited and twice as ugly as when seen in repose.

I asked, "How in the hell do you know? The fella says himself he did it. He ought to know, shouldn't he?"

"He's a crank," Socrates Bean snapped. "A psychotic, gabby, but harmless nut! I doubt if he ever committed a crime bigger than purse-snatching, in his whole life."

"You can tell by just seeing his photo?"

The voice of Socrates Bean went low and harsh. "No! Lippy did time in the pen while I was incarcerated there. We were fellow convicts."

Blood felt hot in my cheeks. I don't know why I blushed. I'd heard my employer speak about the penitentiary often enough before.

It's funny, but up to now, I'd never actually visualized the homely little eccentric man as a convict, dressed in prison gray, herded inside the high walls with companions like Lippy Creel.

After a moment I cleared my throat. "If he's innocent, what makes him walk into

police headquarters and ask for this murder rap?"

"He's a crank. It's nothing new, McKane. In almost every big police case, there's a crank who pops up with a damned fool confession."

"Why?"

"I don't know. In Lippy, I imagine it's his big-shot complex. I remember in the prison yard, he was always tagging around behind some well-known crook or gangster. He was always boasting about the fabulous jobs he'd pulled. I'm sure," said Socrates Bean, "Lippy would confess he killed President Lincoln, if he thought he could get his name into the newspapers by saying so."

I didn't get it. What good's a scrapbook full of conquests to a convicted murderer? He can't read his publicity after he's been to the chair!

I said: "If Creel's as crazy as all that, the cops can tell he's a cheap fake."

"I wouldn't gamble on it, McKane. This one's a big case and the police are at their wits' end. There must be a lot of heat on, a lot of pressure for an arrest, to satisfy the public." The eyes of Socrates Bean burned at me. "Anyway, Al, the police make mistakes. I know. I was one of their prize blunders myself."

On that I couldn't argue. Socrates Bean shrugged.

"Maybe, as you say, the police will release Lippy in a day or so. Just in case they don't, though, we'd better take immediate steps."

I'D seen it coming, of course. I tried to duck. This one was different—those other two cases had been really small-time, small-town stuff, after all. Those two cases had involved bucking nothing worse than local sheriffs and constables.

I said: "Wait a minute! This one's tough! Those cops are tough. You get tangled up with them over this girl's murder and it might look like you were trying—"

The homely little man cut in: "That's right. That's what makes it perfect. Here's a headline slaying—a suspect with a criminal record—a suspect damned by his own, voluntary confession! As a result I'm certain every newspaper reader in this city tonight is convinced of Lippy's guilt. A successful defense of Lippy will be a triumph over public prejudice! It'll be an unforgettable demonstration of my contention that

the very blackest of appearances may conceal utter innocencece."

"You forget to say *if*, Mr. Bean."

Socrates chafed his pudgy palms. "You won't fail me, Al. You never have yet. Anyway, I suspect it'll be a fairly simple case."

He picked up the paper, frowned at it a moment, then asked: "You've been following this murder in the papers, haven't you? So you've no doubt already got a fairly comprehensive grasp of the evidence that could be used against Lippy."

I remembered aloud for his benefit: "Mary Warmsett was a student at something called the Barrow Conservatory of Music. She lived in a rooming house at 1437 Juniper Street. She used to go out to River Heights on Sunday and play an organ in a church there. She got twenty dollars a Sunday for doing it. Sometimes she went out Saturday afternoon and stayed overnight with the preacher and his wife."

"Go on."

"On Saturday, the ninth," I said, "she is supposed to have left the rooming house around noon. She never came back and she wasn't in church the next day. Monday about eleven a.m. they found her body in the backyard of a For Sale residence at 8692 Upland Street. It was a mess. The cops think the killer tried to clean up his job, though, so's not to miss any identifying scars. Nobody knows where the girl went Saturday or what happened before she was killed that night. It was a complete, blank mystery until Lippy Creel gave himself up. The paper says he confessed and the police are checking the details before releasing the confession."

Socrates Bean rubbed his chin. "It's even simpler than I hoped. All you've got to do is find out Lippy's actual movements from Saturday noon to Monday noon."

"He's locked up. I can't talk to him. You want me to start down the street asking everybody I meet, did they see him during those three days over a week ago?"

Socrates Bean's frown wasn't for me; it was a wrinkling, reminiscent scowl.

"Let's see. He used to talk about a woman. What was her name? Madge something. Madge Mason. She was on the stage, I believe."

"She's night club talent," I said, "and he must have been talking through his big-shot complex. Thousands of guys would like to brag they knew Madge Mason."

"He wasn't bragging. He mumbled her name in his sleep." Socrates Bean flushed.

I didn't like my job any better for finding out he and the confessed killer had been cell-mates.

CHAPTER II

"The Victim's Pest"

SAY this for Socrates Bean—he was willing to spend his million. Once convinced some luckless human stood in peril of an undeserved murder rap and the dollars meant no more to Bean than so many cigarette papers.

Alone, I headed for the Palace Club. It was the kind of high-class night spot the average person frequently sees—in the movies. It had all the fixings: the doorman in the gold-braided uniform, the stunningly beautiful cloakroom girl, the bathing-beauty type of cigarette girl, the black velvet rope guarding off the main entrance. And the head-waiter was a suave Frenchman with just a trace of Paris in his accent.

You always have to tip them, so when he asked whether I had a reservation, I slipped him a folded twenty of Socrates Bean's expense money.

"A quiet little table back in one of the corners," I requested.

The Frenchman's eyebrows went up because generally the free spenders want a table close to the floorshow. "This way," he indicated.

The table I got was really a honey. Away off in the farthest corner, it was behind a pillar, too. The head-waiter whisked a Reserved placard off the cloth and I figured it was a table reserved for customers the management hoped never to see again.

I whipped out another twenty. "I'd like a word with Miss Mason."

He collared the money before he told me, "That perhaps won't be so easily arranged. Your name, sir?"

"No name. Tell her it's personal—it concerns an old friend of hers."

"The friend's name, then?"

"I think she'd rather I didn't mention that."

"I see. I'll try, sir."

I was a little surprised myself that it worked.

Madge Mason was twenty-eight to thirty, statuesque, clad in half-a-grand's worth of

gold lame costume. She was beautiful but in the old-fashioned, Greek-goddess style. There was too much of her, by modern pin-up standards. Dress one of those Venus-de-Milo types in a swim-suit and in the Atlantic City parade she'd be good for laughs.

I recognized her voice; it was one I'd often caught on the radio.

"You say you have a message for me?"

"It isn't exactly a message. Miss Mason, did Lippy Creel ever mention to you knowing a man named Bean?"

"Bean?" She frowned.

She knew Lippy, all right. I jumped on this. I said: "So you do know Lippy?"

"Yes, I've known him most of my life. We went to the same public school, on the wrong side of the tracks."

Her voice was so steady about it, I wondered whether she'd seen a paper, whether she knew Lippy was in for the Warmsett murder.

There was another, funny thing about it. I asked, "Lippy's quite a bit older than you are, isn't he?"

She nodded. "He was retarded in school. A big, overgrown, sixteen-year-old boy in the fourth grade—that's how I always think of him. He was like a big, devoted dog tagging along at my heels."

"When did you last see him, Miss Mason?"

"Today. This afternoon."

"What did you talk about?"

She looked at me, straight into both eyes. "He told me that he murdered Mary Warmsett. I advised him to give himself up to the police."

IT TOOK my breath. You don't expect a person to blurt out an admission like this one, not to a total stranger, to me who could be a newspaper reporter or anything else.

Still, if Madge Mason wanted to talk, I was willing to listen.

"You believed him?" I asked.

"Under the circumstances I had to."

"What circumstances, Miss Mason?"

The woman in the gold lame gown began talking in that smooth, creamy professionally trained voice of hers. The first five or six words told me I was listening to a prepared, carefully thought out statement. "I'd better start at the beginning." She sighed. And of course the beginning is the

one place witnesses never do start, *unless* they've figured out their stories in advance.

"Surely you know how it is," she said, smiling at me. "I'm an artist, a successful professional. I'm forever being plagued by amateurs. It's odd, because people would never dream of walking into a busy dentist's office to ask for free lessons in how to repair teeth! Yet every prominent, professional singer in the business is constantly hounded by these amateurs who want you to listen to their voices, recommend teachers, arrange radio auditions, write letters of introduction, and so on, and so on. They write imploring letters, they lay in wait for you at the radio stations, they break into your dressing room, they even camp out on your doorstep. It's an awful nuisance and sometimes it's heartbreaking, too. The poor things are so sure that one word from me, just one teeny word, could raise them from poverty to wealth and fame."

I was ahead of her—couldn't help being ahead of her. All this build-up could mean only one thing.

"The Warmsett girl came to you?"

"Yes. Yes, she did. She was one of the pathetic ones. She hung around outside the club every night for a week, so she said, trying to work up the nerve to ask for an interview. It was her idea that I'd only have to snap my fingers and get her a job as a pianist in some orchestra."

"But you didn't tell this to the police?"

"Heavens, no. I didn't even remember the girl's name. There are so many like her, why would I remember any particular one of them? She stopped me that one night on the sidewalk outside the club, and I didn't actually get a good look at her. It never occurred to me *she* might be the murder victim, until Lippy Creel talked to me this afternoon."

"Go on. What'd Lippy say?"

The night-club singer's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why, you already know that, don't you?"

It gave me a pretty fair clue to what Madge Mason had in mind. I stalled. "It won't hurt to go over the same ground twice. Lippy isn't too bright. He could forget and leave out important details. So I'd like to hear exactly what he told you."

This was thin but then almost any quick, glib reply will satisfy the average person. Most people just aren't familiar with the routine of an investigation. It's only on

second, later thought that they realize these little weaknesses.

SHE nodded. "Yes, poor Lippy's awfully dumb. That's really why I gave him the job, because I felt sorry for him, and for old times' sake. It seems the Warmsett girl—"

"Miss Mason, please," the French head-waiter appealed. He'd tippy-toed up to the table so softly I hadn't realized he was standing over us. "I hate to interrupt but two detectives from the police department just stepped in and asked for you."

I looked around, craned my neck around the pillar. The dicks out at the velvet rope couldn't be mistaken for Palace Club customers. They'd kept their felt hats on, brims tugged low over their eyes.

Madge Mason's voice had startled vibrations. "Why, I thought *you* were—!"

I looked back. The pupils in her eyes were as big as nickels. The head-waiter thought faster than either of us. After all, this was his domain. The owners of the Palace Club hadn't hired him just to stick out his hand and swallow twenty-dollar tips. It was the Frenchman's business to size up situations like this one and act fast.

He pivoted like a ballet dancer and let out his legs in long, gliding steps toward the two officers at the entrance.

Madge Mason blurted, "You lied to me!"

I knew the head-waiter would be back with the dicks in thirty seconds. If she repeated that crack in front of them, they'd throw me into jail for impersonating an officer. Half a minute wasn't long enough to argue Madge Mason into a change of mind.

I jumped up and dived along the back wall of the club.

Miss Mason screamed.

Looking sidewise I saw the detectives legging themselves over the velvet rope. Then my outstretched hand hit the panel of a back wall, twin folding door. The rich smells of eight-dollar pheasant dinners filled the long galley of the Palace Club's kitchen. White-capped chefs raised astonished faces as I raced past them. I yelled, "Fire!" and the cook nearest the back door had that door open by the time I reached it. I was the second out and there must have been a dozen well-fed bodies jamming the doorway behind me.

It was a human log jam, one the two headquarters' dicks couldn't possibly tear

apart in the few seconds I needed to sprint up the alley to the street.

A BLOCK away, across the street, the neon sign of the Arrow Club tried to draw patronage away from the Palace. It lacked a little of the Palace's elegance, so here I slipped the head-waiter a mere ten for a table and five more for a word with the star of the Arrow's floorshow.

In succession I tried the Four-Forty, La Lugar, Benjy's, Club Rojo, Cascade Room, Dolliento's, and the Casino. There were plenty of others, if Socrates Bean cared to spend the money. There was even time for the others tonight because I found Socrates gloomily switching off the commercial end of the ten o'clock news.

"Did the cops release Lippy's confession yet?" I asked him.

"No. But they claim Miss Mason confirms his guilt." Discouraged worry made Bean's gargoyle face more solemnly homely than usual. Par on his phizz was about seventy crows-feet wrinkles but now he scored over a hundred. "What'd she tell you?"

I recited Madge Mason's unfinished story. I said, "I checked the other night spots as long as the money held out. Mary Warmsett never loitered around any of those clubs. She never tackled any of their talent to help her land a job. Mason's lying, or else the Warmsett girl had some special reason for singling her out of a few thousand professionals in town."

Socrates Bean pokered up the fire, sourly. "The worst of it is, the radio says the police are having Lippy re-enact the crime in the morning."

"That's swell, isn't it? If he's as innocent as you think, he just won't be able to."

Bean rested a long, pondering gaze on the flames. "That'd be true, perhaps, if Lippy was a normal human being. He isn't. He's an experienced, psychotic liar. Obviously the poor crackpot has brooded over this murder until he knows the newspaper accounts by heart. The details he'll be able to gather from the detectives' expressions, the tones of their voices. He'll be guided by their wishes to the extent that he'll come through with a completely convincing reconstruction."

"He must be damned anxious to burn!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly, McKane. You and I are trying to save a stir-crazed fanatic who will do his

utmost to defend this fantasy of his. It's his big-shot complex we're up against, his lifelong thirst for criminal notoriety. He'd literally rather be an electrocuted lion than the living gutter cur he's always been."

Why should we bother? Why should I bother, at the risk of landing in jail myself?

I lay awake that night wondering, tossing. Those other cases had been different, those other suspects had been unfortunate people whose plight gripped your heartstrings. I felt no such sympathy for Lippy Creel, this brain-twisted cipher, who, if he wasn't a killer, *wanted* to be one!

Nor, with me, was it the beautiful Madge Mason angle. It struck me the singer packed quite a big-shot complex of her own. Actually, not one word of regret about Mary Warmsett's fate had crossed her lips. Madge Mason grieved for the younger girl the way a candle feels sorry for the moth burned in the candle's flame. . . .

I lay awake and I tossed. I kept seeing this Mary Warmsett, this shy conservatory girl-student who played a church organ Sundays, hanging around outside the swank Palace Club. Night after night. Getting up her nerve to hit the famous Miss Mason for help.

What made Mary Warmsett pick the Palace and Madge Mason out of all the dozens of night spots and night-spot singers? And

was her reason somehow tied up with the kid's death?

Finally I reached for the alarm clock and set it for four a.m. If the cops were going to reconstruct the crime, they'd have to take Lippy Creel out to 8692 Upland Street.

CHAPTER III

"Meet the Milkman"

IT WAS one of those raw, misty mornings, the kind of mist that's thick enough to film a windshield but so thin there's not enough moisture for the wipers to get a hold on.

I parked a block away and trudged up the street with my collar turned high and my hands in my pockets. The neighborhood slept, inside of stucco-walled bungalows, behind curtained windows. The block was far enough from downtown to be middle-class and white-collar, running on the regulation office hours and public school schedule. It would be six-thirty to seven when the housewives lighted up the kitchens and the electric shavers started humming in the bathrooms.

So I was safe enough, unless an early-hour police prowler chanced along, or a neighborhood physician came yawning home from a night call. If these things happened, I'd be in a bad spot.



I finger-tested a cellar window. It was locked, of course, but I applied force.

The house was the next bungalow to the one on the corner; it was like all the houses in the block, a one-story stucco on a sixty-foot width of lot with just room enough for the garage driveways between the houses. In spite of being fenced in with a yard-high hedge, it had about as much privacy as a pool table.

I turned in past the For Sale sign in the front yard, following an eighteen-inch walk between the house and the hedge. If I'd wanted to rap on wood for luck, the sill of the neighbor's bay window was close enough that I could have done it. But bay window spells living room, so the neighbor's bedrooms were probably on the other side of the house next door. The house down the street was farther away but I'd have been working under its bedchamber windows.

I knelt inside the hedge and finger-tested a cellar window. It was locked, of course. I tugged a long-shanked screwdriver from my pocket, forced the blade into the crevice and applied force with both hands.

Bursting wood popped like a pistol shot.

For a half-minute I waited, breathless. Under normal circumstances I could have walked away from an alarm—I could be just a drunk looking for a friend's home. It wouldn't be so easy here, in a block keyed up by a sensational murder mystery. But it'd be better than being seen crawling into Number 8692.

My eyes glued to the lace-curtained bay window, I waited for the suspicious hand twitching aside the draperies and the frightened, peeking face.

Seemingly the neighbors slept on.

I twisted the cellar window from its casement and wriggled through the opening, feet first. My soles found a cement floor. It was the work of a minute to prop the window in place again.

It was still night, down in the basement. I groped my way through some barrels, circled the dense blackness of a furnace, and found steps mounting upward. The door at the head of the stairs I located by bumping nose-on into it. A twist of the knob let me out into a kitchen, identified as such by a glimpse of its white enameled sink.

I saw no more.

Somebody—but I didn't see who—was waiting for me with something—I didn't see what. It might have been a gun, a regulation sap, or half a brick twisted inside a sock.

THE thing caught me just back of and above the right ear. It knocked me blind, blacked out, cold. The next thing I knew, I was crawling on my hands and knees across an uphill linoleum floor. It seemed to slant uphill for about a quarter of a mile to the kitchen sink. I crept all that way in what seemed a mere hour or so. It was dizzying but I crawled up the side of the sink, too, and turned on the cold water faucet.

No water came out. The water in the empty house had been shut off.

I could have cried, I'd been so sure a cold wet splash would do things for my throbbing head.

A chilling thought sobered me just as effectively. Suppose this bird who'd conked me made for a phone and notified the police? It'd be breaking and entering, if the cops found me here. I reached the door in two skating strides. It wasn't locked, because, I supposed the other fellow had been in a hurry himself. I got the door open, got a breath of damp misty air, and a voice sang out: "Good morning, sir!"

My stomach did yo-yo tricks as I braced myself in the doorway. Facing me, only about six feet away, was a carrot-haired, pink-cheeked, grinning youth in a starched white coverall outfit.

"The name's Johnson, Eddie Johnson," he confided. "You're new here, aren't you? Just bought the place, I guess? I'd like to leave you one of our cards; I know you'll be more than satisfied with our products."

By that time he was on the doorstep, pushing the card into my hand, a foot length of cardboard ruled into tiny squares.

"Possibly I could leave you something this morning, sir? Milk, cream, ranch eggs, cottage cheese, Bulgarian—"

I CUT into this. "You make daily deliveries, Johnson?"

"You bet, sure."

"You don't forget and skip a day now and then? The last place we lived, we could never depend on the milkman. Some days he'd be around before we got the card marked, sometimes he wouldn't show up until noon, and once in a while not at all. It got so we've formed the habit of buying our milk and butter at the store."

Johnson grinned. "I haven't missed once in fifteen months. You can ask the neighbors—they all buy from me." He reached down, picked up his tray-load of bottles.

"You just mark the card and leave the empties on the back step here, and I'll never dis- appoint you."

"Uh. You generally cut across my back- yard, too, do you?"

His pink cheeks reddened. "Well, sir, it does save steps, instead of trotting back to the alley every trip, when the houses are this close."

"It's okay with me as long as you don't rattle the bottles."

"Yes, sir."

He went on, scissor-stepped his way over a low spot in the ledge.

"Oh, say, Johnson."

"Yes, sir?"

"You don't work seven days a week, do you?"

He said, "No, I'm off Saturdays and Sun- days but you'll find my relief driver's reli- able, too."

"Just so I don't find him rattle-banging his bottles around the place when I'm trying to sleep mornings! You tell him that."

I went inside and closed the door. I was hopped up now, ready even to risk the breaking and entering business.

First, I raised one of the kitchen windows an inch, then I made a tour of the house. It was a naked house, furnished with nothing more than a few stepped-on cigarette butts, the leavings of people brought here by the real estate agent, probably.

There was daylight enough down in the cellar now to see that it was just an ordinary cellar.

I sat on the top step and smoked two cigarettes. Kid sounds began up and down the street outside. Somebody called, "Kitty-kitty, kitty!" The whir of starters wind- ing up car engines filtered through the partly open window.

And after a while I heard a voice: "All right, show us where you laid the body."

I sneaked across the linoleum floor, dou- bled up so I couldn't be seen through the window, head raised just high enough to catch a glimpse of the five men in the back- yard.

It was no job picking out the four dicks because Lippy Creel had Big House loser written all over him. I've seen the same look come over Socrates Bean's homely face when the radio surprises him by letting out a police siren squawk, and I've seen it creep into his eyes when he gets to talking about what prison does to a man. This big

ox of a Lippy Creel had the look perma- nently carved into every line of his thick features.

He stuck out one finger, pointing—only the finger didn't point anywhere in particu- lar.

It was just an aimless gesture.

"Where?" a cop asked.

"There, up by the hedge."

That much he could have read in the newspapers.

"Uh-huh, with the head pointed which way?"

"I ain't sure," Lippy said. "It was dark and I was drinking and I just sort of dropped it down in a hurry."

"It wasn't so dark but you could see to do that?"

"I'd say it was just beginning to get a little bit light," said Lippy.

I'd heard enough to realize Socrates Bean was absolutely right. Lippy Creel was innocent.

And the poor stir-bug was doing his lame- brained damnedest to lie himself into the electric chair!

I felt I'd heard enough of this, and as it had to be a broad daylight getaway, I took the bit in my teeth and the doorknob in my hand.

The five swung and stared at me, Lippy blankly, the dicks with cold-eyed hostility. "Just who the hell are you?" one of the party rapped.

I said nastily, "I represent the real-estate office in charge of this property and we're getting just a little tired of sightseers tramping down the grass."

A badge flashed at me. "Police Depart- ment. Go on, scram."

I scrammed, all right. I hiked down to the next block, gave the juice to the car, and headed toward River Heights. It was an eight-mile run and it gave me time to do a little collected thinking.

A murder like this one is really a case of hiatus. Solving it means closing the gap—the interval between the Saturday noon Mary Warmsett left her rooming house and the Monday forenoon her body was found. You can build a bridge forward from the victim's known movements and another bridge back from what the crime tells about the criminal. When these two bridges meet, that's it.

The man I wanted to see now was the preacher.

CHAPTER IV

"Circumstantial Evidence"

THE Reverend Alfred Waite was a real gentleman of the cloth, fatherly, white-haired, sympathetic. He was ushering a weeping woman out of his study when I arrived. He patted her shoulder. "Be of good cheer, Mrs. Lamp. I'll write to Mr. Anslooyd myself, air mail, this very day. He's a charitable, Christian gentleman and I'm sure he'll act for the best."

"It isn't like Joe was really drunk." The woman sniffled.

"But he'd been drinking, hadn't he?"

"Just a few beers the night before," Joe's wife protested.

"Umm-m. And perhaps a wee hair of the dog that bit him the next morning, too?"

"No, parson, I swear he didn't even have a hangover. His eyes were maybe a little bloodshot but that's all."

"Umm-m, well, I'll write to Mr. Anslooyd and we'll see if we can't get Joe back on the job, but he'll have to report to work clear-eyed and sober."

Another pat on the shoulder. "Now you'll have to excuse me, Mrs. Lamp. This gentleman is waiting."

We went into the study. The Reverend Alfred Waite chuckled. "If you're a hymn-book salesman, I warn you, our church treasury's in a most depleted condition. What with assistance to the foreign missions, our evangelican work in the slums, and the inevitable mortgage on the church building itself—"

"You were able to hire a professional organist for twenty bucks a Sunday," I threw in.

The white-haired pastor didn't become any less fatherly; he became parentally stern. "Who and what are you? A reporter, perhaps?"

"No, sir, I represent Socrates Bean."

"Um-m. And who may he be?"

"You must have heard of Socrates Bean. The famous philanthropist. The great benefactor of the poor and downtrodden victims of injustice."

Reverend Waite looked interested, like you mentioned a ship on the horizon to a man on a life-raft. A philanthropist is a guy who gives money to good causes, and a preacher is a chap who knows good causes that need it.

HE SAID thoughtfully, "Don't get the impression our little church isn't in need of financial assistance. Actually we can't afford a professional organist. Mr. Horace Anslooyd paid Miss Warmsett out of his own pocket. The Anslooyds are great music lovers and they felt really good music adds so much to the services."

"Where can I get in touch with Anslooyd?"

"He is in Florida. He and his wife have been there for the past month."

"Who paid the Warmsett girl while they were away?"

"Why, the thought hadn't occurred to me. I imagine it was handled through Mr. Kettle. He manages the local laundry, which Mr. Anslooyd owns."

"One more question. Did you ever hear Mary Warmsett talk about a night club, the Palace?"

He looked genuinely shocked. He said, "Why, gracious, certainly not. Mary wasn't particularly religious, perhaps, but she was serious-minded. Her tastes were far above that kind of tawdry entertainment."

"Did you ever hear her speak of a Madge Mason?"

"No. Wait. Do you mean Margaret Mason?"

"I might. What about her?"

"It goes to prove what I've just been telling you," the white-haired pastor related. "Margaret Mason was a graduate of the Barrow Conservatory, possibly the most promising graduate the school ever had. Her voice was magnificent. She might have become a concert artist, possibly even an operatic star. But she became discouraged. She became a cheap singer of popular jazz and lowbrow ballads. Now, Mary Warmsett felt that was simply a tragic waste of talent, not to mention the scholarship."

My nerve-ends tingled. "Mention the scholarship some more."

Reverend White said, "The Anslooyds have always been patrons of the musical arts. Horace Tnslooyd's father established a scholarship at Barrow to assist worthy, needy young students."

"Of how much dough?"

"It amounted to several thousand dollars a year when Miss Mason was a student. However, the value of the investments has depreciated in recent years. I believe Mary Warmsett received only about

forty or fifty dollars from that source. But I'm writing to Mr. Ansloydd on another matter and I could inquire the exact facts, and let Mr. Socrates Bean know, if you care to leave me his address."

I said, "Bean likes faster action than that for his money. Maybe Kettle at the laundry knows."

THE Ansloydd Laundry was an old-timer, a square, squat, red brick edifice dated back by numerals over its doorway to 1903. There was nothing flashy about the dingy interior; it was an old-style money-maker business, the kind which clears its fifty or sixty thousand dollar annual profit as sure as come Christmas.

A girl in a peppermint-striped dress stopped typing long enough to say Mr. Kettle wasn't in to salesmen, except Tuesday afternoons.

"Ask him," I said, "does he want the Central Labor Committee to pull the switch on the works here?"

I got in to see Manager Sam Kettle, who was fiftyish, a gangling, hollow-cheeked man of the high-starched collar and gold-rimmed-eyeglasses breed. He'd started in here as an office boy thirty-eight years ago. He told me so. And in those days there'd been no damned fool labor-union nonsense. He told me that, too. And what in hell did the Central Committee want now?

"You fired Joe Lamp out of here, didn't you?"

"Certainly I did. He showed up Monday morning with a whiskey breath that stank clear back to his Saturday night binge. We can't have a driver in his condition. Aside from the danger of involving one of our trucks in a costly accident, housewives don't like that sort of thing. I've had complaints about Lamp before and—"

"Yeah. But it was a union man you put on his route that day?"

"I handled the route myself."

I stared at him.

Kettle's eyes snapped behind the gold-rims.

He said: "Lamp threatened to raise hell through the union, as apparently he's trying to do. So I climbed into his truck myself. I talked to a number of women on his route. I have the names of a half-dozen customers who told me he has come to their homes reeking of liquor. This

is one case I'm prepared to fight to the highest court in the land if necessary."

"Uh-huh. This week-end of Lamp's big drunk was the same on which Mary Warmsett got killed, wasn't it?"

The snap faded out of his eyes, left them lack-luster. The hollows in his cheeks shifted position a little. "I don't get the connection."

"Could be there's one. If the girl came here to collect her twenty dollars, and if Joe Lamp saw her—"

Bite came into Kettle's tone. "In the first place, she didn't come here! I mailed her the check, weekly. In the second place, Joe Lamp's a drunken sot but he's no killer. In the third place, the police have the killer under arrest."

"And in the fourth place," I supplied, "I don't sound like a representative of the Central Labor Committee. I'm not. I'm investigating that girl's death, on the theory Lippy Creel didn't do the job."

"Then why does he say he did?"

"Because he's stir-crazy, because the notoriety of a front-page crime appeals to his big-shot complex, and maybe for a third reason. The point is, when did you last see Mary Warmsett?"

"The Sunday before she disappeared."

"Where?"

"In church."

"You go to church regularly?"

"Of course."

"But you mailed Miss Warmsett her checks. You couldn't simply hand them to her?"

"I don't transact business on the Lord's Day."

"You mean, Mr. Kettle, it was okay for her to earn the dough on Sunday but not okay for you to work up a sweat handing her the pay check?"

You couldn't get under Kettle's skin. He pursed his lips. "Young man, you're being irreverent and you're also wasting my time."

I left him, headed the car back along the River Heights Boulevard into the city. There was a police car pulled up at the curb in front of Socrates Bean's rack-and-ruin residence. I hoped it was just another complaint about the uncut weeds creating a fire hazard. I remembered I'd blurted out Bean's name to Madge Mason, though. So it could be last night's two dicks with a paper for me.

If it was that, I decided it'd be wisest to take the pinch right now and in front of Socrates Bean. He'd know about it and he could get a lawyer to arrange bail. Whereas if I had the hard luck to be picked up somewhere else, it might be hours before they'd let me phone him.

I WADED through the weeds and up the porch steps, and inside were the same two dicks.

"Your name McKane?" the taller of the pair sang out.

"Yeah."

"You live here?"

"Yeah, so what?"

The shorter one asked, "You know where the cyanide's hid?"

"The how-much?"

"The poison, dope."

"What poison?"

The tall one said, "About an hour ago, Bean came down to headquarters and asked could he talk to Lippy Creel. He said he knew Lippy in stir and thought Lippy would come clean and tell him the truth, if we would let him talk with Lippy, private. So we left the two of them in a room a while, because to tell the fact, Lippy's so goofy it's hard to tell did he or didn't he kill the Warmsett girl."

"A room with a wire in it?" I asked.

"Sure. That's how we hear the moan and the fall. So we rush in and there's Lippy writhing on the floor. He was flopping around like a chicken with its head cut off and that was about as long as he lived. Cyanide. The set-up looks like Bean slipped him the poison."

It was close—I all but fainted away, flat on the moth-riddled hallway carpet. My knees buckled and my throat filled with a hard lump and my blinking eyes quit seeing the two dicks clearly. What I saw was Socrates Bean's sad, homely face the way it looked when he brooded over the horror of innocent people held for homicides they never committed. And what I seemed to hear was the little guy's voice talking about the twenty years he'd served for just such a homicide, twenty years hacked out of his life because cops and judge and jury made a mistake.

I got the words out slowly, blurting them around that lump in my throat: "You arrested Socrates Bean?"

"Sure. Suspicion of murder."

CHAPTER V

"The Laundryman Cometh, Too"

THEY took me downtown, and the end of the trip was an office inside a doorway that said *Homicide* in big letters, and *Capt. J. N. Wheeler* in much smaller ones.

This Captain Wheeler was as nice a cop as ever fitted a pair of handcuffs onto anybody. A tall, bald citizen with very mild blue eyes. Stack him alongside of the Reverend Waite and your average citizen would have a headache figuring out which of these two fatherly chaps was the preacher.

He said, "Your name is Al McKane and you're employed by Socrates Bean as a sort of all-around handyman, bodyguard, and confidential investigator. You've been running around trying to dig up something on the Warmsett killing."

I didn't deny it.

Captain Wheeler said, "You were trying to spring Lippy Creel and not succeeding. So Bean himself comes to headquarters and asks for a private chat with his old prison buddy. We leave the two of them together and right away Lippy falls down dead from cyanide. Cyanide's a quick poison, one that kills practically the minute it's swallowed. We searched Lippy and we know he wasn't carrying any pills. So, how does it add up?"

"It just doesn't. Why would Bean want Lippy dead?"

"It might have been fear of something Lippy would say, or perhaps it might have been what the newspapers call a mercy killing. Maybe Bean saw himself as a Good Samaritan putting his old pal out of misery. He's looney enough."

"He's merely eccentric, Captain."

"He's off his nut," Wheeler said. "He's tried to hang himself with his necktie and when we took away his necktie he tried to bat out his brains against the cell wall. We've got him handcuffed and leg-ironed onto his bunk and he's tossing and yelling like a hophead who's been off the junk a week. He's a raving madman."

I had pictures, sickening pictures, as the kindly faced captain talked.

"Am I under arrest, too?"

"No," he said, "thanks to DuChannel."

"Who?"

"Jacques DuChannel. Headwaiter at the

Palace. You can beat it unless you've got something to tell that would help clear Bean."

I beat it. I called a lawyer—the best in town—and then I looked up Jacque DuChannel in the phone book. But I didn't call; I went around to the address. It was crumby, a walk-up flat. This Frenchman probably took in a couple of grand a week in tips, but when he came to the door he had an electric iron in his hand. A pair of pants lay gently steaming on an ironing board in the middle of the room behind him.

"I hear you helped get me out of a scrape with the cops," I told him.

"It was a nothing, *monsieur*. As I remarked to Miss Mason, not even the American *gendarmes* go about scattering twenty-dollar tips. To impersonate the police thus is ridiculous, no?"

"Yes," I said. "When did you pass this remark to Miss Mason?"

"When? But at once. *Monsieur* withholds the name, I say. Is he a cop, Miss Mason makes to inquire. Assuredly, I say, *monsieur* is too free with his money."

"This is before she came to my table, huh?"

"But, yes, of course."

I thought, and said, "Have you got a key to the Palace? And could you get Miss Mason down there on any pretext at all?"

"For a consideration anything is possible," Jacques DuChannel thought.

I dug down into Socrates Bean's expense money and found a consideration.

IT'S an odd thing about night clubs, even the swankiest ones. By daylight they're as dismal as mausoleums. By daylight the Palace Club's velvet rope was about as glamorous as a hangman's noose. The chairs were stacked on the tables and the only sound in the place was the swish of a lonely scrubwoman's brush. We went back to Madge Mason's dressing room and I looked around while DuChannel telephoned, but I found no clues. Of course not. Three-quarters of an hour later, Miss Mason walked in.

"You!" she said. "You dare to show your face here again?"

"I'm not the one that's in trouble, Miss Mason. You are."

Her beautiful face stayed smooth. "I don't understand."

So I said, "Look, Venus. Last night you knew I wasn't a cop. Jacques told you I wasn't. Yet you bothered to tell me that long story about Mary Warmsett hanging around outside this joint and how she hit you for professional help."

She said stormily, "Last night you also mentioned a man named Bean and now the police are holding Bean for killing Lippy, and no doubt you're just as guilty as he is!"

"Let's stick to you, Beautiful. I figure it's true Mary Warmsett hung around here and talked to you, but not about getting a job. She wouldn't need a job, not if she could get the money to continue her musical education in another way. If, for instance, there was a scholarship."

I watched but she didn't react particularly. Maybe because those great big Greccian goddess types tend to be a little bit bovine. Or maybe because she was being very, very cautious.

"Why would anyone bother me about a thing like that?" Madge Mason asked blandly.

"You were raised on the wrong side of the tracks yourself. You got your musical education on a scholarship, otherwise you probably couldn't have afforded to go to the conservatory at all. Quite possibly you'd know certain facts about the set-up, such as how much money was invested in the trust fund, or whatever it was, and where, and how it was handled."

"Oh, but I don't." Madge Mason laughed. "When people like the Ansloydds give you money like that, gracious, you don't go around looking into the gift horse's mouth. At least, I didn't."

I told her, "Nobody says you did. The point is, you'd be a logical one for Mary Warmsett to ask questions of, if she got to asking questions about that scholarship."

"I couldn't have told her anything."

"You did get the money, though."

"Yes."

"By check or cash?"

"Check, naturally."

"Who signed the checks?"

Annoyance marred the beauty of her classic features. "Heavens, it was eight years ago! I don't remember now what those checks looked like."

I SAID, "Well, it sure as hell wasn't Ansloydd because you've just remembered the name of Ansloydd. If you've forgotten,

it was because the checks were signed by some employee or clerk or manager. Right?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure."

"It was Kettle, wasn't it?"

Her eyelids opened wide but the pupils in her eyes were small and shiny. Like arrow points bedded in the whites.

I stepped to the dressing-room door and opened it and called, "DuChannel, come in here a minute!"

The Frenchman came in and I saw her give him the wink, but I didn't see any response on his face.

"I want to describe a man," I said. "You know the patrons of the club by heart and I wonder if one of them isn't a man aged fifty-some, gangling, wearing gold-rimmed glasses, likes old-fashioned high collars, and he probably prefers a table back in some corner where nobody's apt to spot him?"

"A customer? No," said DuChannel, and my heart sank. But then he grinned. "We don't serve customers in the dressing rooms."

Madge Mason really looked like a Venus de Milo now, a carved-in-stone one.

"A personal friend of the talent," I said. "A dear old sugar daddy who drops around to the dressing room and has a quiet slug of hootch on the sly. And pays for it by chiseling on the scholarship fund. He's the trusted old employee, thirty-eight years with the firm, and he goes to church, too. It's easy for him to phony up the books, say the investments have gone sour, and slip a few thousand a year into his pocket. He'd needed it, supporting a night-club warbler in the style she's accustomed to."

MISS MASON was stone-work weathering under the words.

"The Warmsett girl saw him hanging around here, or hanging around you, or maybe she just went to the guy that Saturday and asked too many questions about why the scholarship had melted down to nothing," I said. "It probably wasn't so much the money, it was he couldn't bear the public disgrace. So he killed her. Right there in the laundry, closed Saturday night until Monday morning, with lots of tubs and running water and everything."

There was dead silence as I went on.

"Now look how it all fits. He's safe enough inside the laundry but outside's all the risk in the world. Say he loaded that girl's body in his car and drove off with it

somewhere, a hundred things could happen and he's the cautious type to think of them all. Cars break down and have to be towed into the garage, cars get run into by drunks and the cops swarm over the wreck, or maybe there's just the one car and his wife is using it that night."

I had it all figured now.

"So he fits that body into a laundry bag. Washed up clean, so no blood seeps through. A bag like that won't attract any attention in a laundry truck. The next morning he fires a driver he's been looking to fire a long while. He takes that driver's truck himself and again it's the simplest thing on earth. A laundry truck stops in an alley, a guy is seen toting a laundry bag, or two bags. Who even gives it a second glance? Nobody! The guy dumps out those bags next to a hedge and he's gone and that's all there's to it. Corpses generally get hauled in the dark of the night and everybody's going to think that body was left there before daylight. Unless you know a milkman makes a habit of crossing that yard every morning early, and he didn't see any body there or he'd have reported it."

How close was I? Miss Mason's face didn't tell. Miss Mason's lips were locked and her eyes fixed and staring. She was listening hard enough.

I said, "Was he laying for the milkman this morning? Out there in that empty house where he slugged me? Or did he just want to know how the cops were taking Lippy's act?"

She listened and she didn't answer.

I said, "About Lippy now. You've known him all your life and you knew he was crazy enough to confess anything. What'd you do, sell him the idea he could get a few days wonderful notoriety and afterward he could weasel out? You promised him an out, an alibi. And did Mr. Kettle put up a little cash payment besides?"

Madge Mason's face unfroze, it came alive, and it wasn't a beautiful face any more. "Why don't you ask him; he's here."

She must have phoned him as soon as DuChannel phoned her. He was here and he'd opened the dressing-room door without making the least sound. He had a gun in his fist.

The shooting started right away.

I could understand how he missed me the first time—I dived. I couldn't understand how he missed me the next two shots.

I was down on the floor because the dive didn't carry me to his knees as I'd prayed. I was belly-flat on the floor and not a yard from him, and how could he miss?

He wasn't even doing the shooting.

He was sitting there in the doorway, hanging onto one bleeding arm, blinking at it with his gold-rims dangling from one ear down his cheek.

I looked some more and I saw the two dicks with hats on, standing in the hallway just behind the guy.

It turned out they had tailed me from the time I left Captain Wheeler's office. I found that out when we got back to Wheeler's office, and there was Socrates Bean on one side of the desk and Wheeler on the other and I'll be damned if there wasn't a cribbage board between them.

I said to Wheeler, "I see he's still wearing his necktie."

"Perhaps I exaggerated a bit," said the fatherly captain with the friendliest grin in the world. "If I got you worried, I thought you might spill anything you knew. You didn't, so the boys tailed you."

"He plays dirty cribbage, too," said Socrates. "I think he knows these cards by their backs." But then his ugly face got

solemn. He said, "As a matter of fact, Al, I was really under arrest until about five minutes ago. And I was shaking like a leaf. But Wheeler here ordered an immediate autopsy on Lippy and the poison wasn't in his stomach. It was down in the intestine. It seems Lippy was a vitamin capsule fan and he swallowed the cyanide in a capsule which was lacquered so it wouldn't dissolve in less than fifteen to eighteen hours."

They chased us out so they could question Madge Mason and Kettle.

About ten o'clock that night the phone rang and it was Captain Wheeler.

He said, "Well, we finally got the big answer."

"Mason was in on it, splitting the scholarship dough?"

He said, "Oh, sure, but not splitting. She's been taking the guy down to his last dime for eight years. He fell for her when she was just a music student and he stayed fallen. But the big answer is why he hauled that body by broad daylight."

"Yeah, why?"

"This Kettle, he wants a light left on in his cell. He's afraid of the dark. He doesn't go out with a corpse at night. I always said this was strictly a psychopathic case."

GROUP PREJUDICE— CANCER OF THE MIND

Cancer is a killer. Group prejudices can be killers, too. The little country club discriminations, the light-hearted but taunting jest behind the back, may seem to some relatively harmless. They aren't, because they sear the soul of the one injured and corrupt the soul of the offender. But even if they were harmless, there would still be little cause for complacency, for nothing in this dynamic world is static. Such things will simply not stay put. According to the law of nature, they either expand or contract, grow or wither. And they won't contract or wither by themselves. Like cancerous cells, they tend of their very nature to multiply; and they can be stamped out only by putting all our knowledge, all our good-will, all our resources, into the fight.

Being an upright citizen made Dan Roark just one cook too many in this melee of murder, but the circumstances left him no other way out of the mess except to

MIX A STIFF ONE



BEFORE I KNEW what it was all about I hit him, the man standing before me with one hand tangled in the blonde's hair and the other raised to slap her again. I slugged him sharp and clean and he went down on the

enameled concrete floor of the Club Casbah, his arms and legs flailing like the flippers on a seal out of water.

He was a big hulk. So big, when I saw him stretched out at my feet, that I didn't like to think of him getting up and throw-

By JOHN G. POTTER

ing his weight at me. He was tall and brutally solid. His small, piggish eyes, open now, but blank, were set under a sloping, overhanging brow. His skin was swarthy and he had a good jaw line, but his wide

heavy lips were too damp and too red. He was wearing tan suede sport oxfords and a brown, tropical worsted suit cut in a definite department-store drape.

I had stopped at the Casbah, a hot spot

Illustrated by
William Meilink



on the North Side, figuring on a few shots between peeks at the strip acts. I had no more than ordered a highball when a mahogany-eyed platinum blonde, with some of her natural brown locks showing at the roots, gave me the nod across the horseshoe bar.

I can broadcast or receive. Tonight I was receiving. I strolled around the bar, pulled a stool up close enough to keep our conversation confidential, and said, "Let's move to a table where we can be exclusive. Shall we?"

Her throaty voice donned its best silk. "But I really don't know you," she said, after she downed the dregs of a rum-and-coke and waited for my next play.

I touched her elbow and she moved away from the bar, guiding me to the table down front, next to the strip ramp.

Our highballs had just arrived when the big boy moved in. He came from behind, grabbed the blonde's hair and tilted her head back. "Playing the field again?" he rasped. Then he hit her in the mouth with his open palm, not too hard, but hard enough to smear her lipstick and to show her who was boss.

My celtic temper won't take a massage. I stood up, kicked my chair out of the way, took two steps around the table and gave it to him, one-two. The one was merely a feint, but the two caught him flush on the jaw. He went down, not out, but groggy.

The blonde stared down at him, fascinated.

"Okay with you?" I asked.

She snapped out of her trance and looked up at me. Her upper lip was distorted in a nasty sneer. "Breeze, you stoop," she hissed. She leaned over the guy, doused him with her highball and slapped his cheeks until he came around.

A mildly curious crowd was beginning to form around our table. I eyed them coldly. "This is a family feud. Beat it." They sauntered back where they came from.

I DIDN'T breeze. I was hard and I knew it and I didn't like being called a stoop. When the gorilla was upright, weaving a little but on his feet, I started at him. A waiter behind me grabbed my arm but I shook him off.

"Want any more, Jocko?" I threatened.

He ran his fingers through his oily black hair and straightened his loud, yellow tie

nervously. "Let's go out in the alley," he suggested. "It's nice and cool out there."

"Where a dozen hoods can gang me?" I sneered. "Not me. You say it. You want more, you get it right here. You don't want more, travel."

He traveled. I turned to speak to the blonde and found myself staring stupidly at an empty chair. I sat down, nursed my highball and tried to figure her angle.

When I indicated a refill, the waiter who brought it whispered over my shoulder. "You shouldn't have done that. He's tough. Very tough."

"Who was he?"

"Big Benny Soloff," he answered, walking away.

I had heard of Big Benny. Who hadn't? He had come up from St. Louis a few weeks before to run the rackets on the North Side. The combine had sent for him, and the combine, a syndicate of twenty-odd politically immune racketeers, didn't like having their stooges shoved around.

WHILE I sat there pondering, the club's five-piece band blasted an anemic fanfare and an effeminate m.c. introduced the first act of the evening, Chloe.

Chloe turned out to be five feet-two inches of curves and dimples wearing no more than an ankle-length gossamer veil, a G-string and an upswept hair-do. Her nose was narrow and tilted just about right, her lips were painted in a petulant pout and her small, almost receding chin was shadowed by a childish cleft.

She drifted from the wings centered in a blue spotlight, with the wispy gossamer floating languidly about her. Specialty dancers invariably pick a particular customer to concentrate on and Chloe picked me.

Maybe it was because I was the only sober male in the front row, or maybe she'd seen the fight and went for the brawny type. I stand six feet up, barefoot, and they say I look pretty good, what with my blue eyes and Irish grin and black locks that stay put without goose grease.

She finished her act, dropped the gossamer veil, twirled and threw a couple of bumps and a wink in my general direction, then ducked backstage.

The Cafe Society whistled and howled and pounded on the tables.

She returned for an encore, this time in

a more revealing pink spotlight and with an amber spot focused directly on her face. The amber tint didn't help her because it washed away her make-up, leaving her face blanched and barren. She frowned irritably toward the projection booth several times as she danced across the stage.

She didn't get very far. She was in front of and above me, simulating a Balinese koochie with a few Minsky bumps tossed in, when a small, back blemish appeared over her left eyebrow. It could have been a spitball or a wad of gum thrown by an onlooker, or a flake of dust from the ceiling. But it wasn't.

It was something that stopped her in mid-stride, something that froze her tantalizing smile into a blank, repulsive grimace. Something like a bullet hole.

She stood there flatfooted for maybe five seconds, then slumped to the floor and lay there, an inert bundle of has-been humanity.

A woman at the bar screamed hysterically and I spun around in my chair but saw nothing awry, only a frightened crowd hesitating a second before making a jostling, panicky exit.

I TURNED back to the stripper. She was splayed on the ramp, one arm hanging awkwardly into the orchestra pit, her cinnabar fingernails almost touching the cymbals atop the bass drum.

Behind me the Casbah emptied like it was on fire. Most of its customers had no yen to be tagged as material witnesses. That would mean a trip to City Hall, where they might find a rap or two of their own waiting for them. Even the bartender beat it.

I was a clean, upright citizen, so I stayed. I went to the bar and mixed myself a stiff one on the house. The empty house. The house with a cadaver for a floor show.

I stayed because I was Dan Roark, a private investigator licensed by the State and bonded for ten G's. And I had a hunch I was swimming in this thing deeper than the surface ripples indicated.

The Law arrived shortly, the Vice Squadrons, who roamed the vicinity constantly, followed by Marty Harrigan of Homicide and a few harness bulls. The house lights were turned on, the doors bolted and a guard planted at each exit. Those of the

hired help who stayed behind to face the Inquisition were huddled in a protective group on stage.

Harrigan, a Black Irishman whose clothes always needed pressing and whose shoe-button eyes saw everything there was to see, spotted me as he entered.

"Hiya, Dan!" he called, waving cheerfully. "All the time getting oiled." He was referring to the heavy wallop I held.

"Can't let my pipes get rusty," I grinned.

The Vice Squad marched down front with the pompous authority of back-wash officialdom. Harrigan hoisted his squat hundred and seventy pounds beside me. "Mix me one," he said then, flicking a glance toward Will Mathewson, straw boss over the Vicers; then added, "Never mind."

He watched me kill my drink, then said, "Why don't you come back with us, Dan?"

"I'm making out." I shrugged, starting to mix another one. "The orders I take are backed with the folding green. I don't work unless I want to and I can lean on a bar without worrying about heels like Mathewson down there."

I thought I saw Harrigan wince but I could be wrong. He changed the subject abruptly. "What can you give me on this thing?"

"Not much. The girl got a slug in the head right in the middle of a bump. No sound at all; at least none that I heard. Maybe some of the customers saw what happened but they scattered like a covey of quails."

Harrigan left the bar and went down the center aisle. The club had originally been a theater and the tables were set in even tiers, leaving the sloping aisles open. The spotlights were operated from the erstwhile projection booth, a built-in extension hanging over the bar.

BEFORE Harrigan reached the stage I caught up with him.

"We've been friends a long time, Marty," I said. "What I'm telling you doesn't concern Mathewson and it might help you. I had a sharp run-in with Big Benny Soloff a few minutes before the dame was pushed over."

"How sharp?"

"I floored him over a frail I picked up at the bar. I thought he left but maybe he didn't. He could have taken a pot-shot at me and hit the girl by accident."

"Okay," Marty said. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Keep me out of it if you can, will you?" I pleaded. In my racket you get ahead faster if you remain anonymous.

"I'll do what I can. It depends," Marty said.

We went up on the ramp together to study the corpse.

The heavy coating of make-up from Chloe's widow's peak to her shoulder blades camouflaged her age but I figured her to be less than twenty. Her flesh was so firm that, when I touched her arm, the flesh didn't give. It was solid as a schoolgirl's.

Aside from the rhinestone-studded G-string and other necessary accessories, her only ornamentation was a wide, ornately carved wedding band on the proper finger.

Harrigan knelt beside her and studied the small, dark blue hole over her eye. Then he looked up at me. "Where were you sitting, Dan?"

I indicated the table. "Over there."

"Who was near you?" He knew I had a photo eye.

"Three young guys, probably college kids out slumming, at the table on my left. A party of four, two men and two women, on my right. Behind me a mousy little gink with an askew toupee. Otherwise the regular run of strip-joint habitués." The bar was packed with grifters who couldn't stand the cover charge at the tables."

"Exactly where was the girl when she got it?"

"About where her right foot is now. She was bobbing and weaving but staying within the spotlights."

Harrigan nodded. Then, for twenty minutes, while waiting for the coroner, he paced around the club, analyzing angles and distances.

AT two a.m. the coroner, a sleepy but efficient ex-surgeon, stood up wearily after an hour's survey of the corpse. "One shot," he said. "Small calibre but bigger than a twenty-two. From quite a distance, because the slug is still in there somewhere. Goodnight." He snapped his medical kit closed and shuffled out.

After all his angling and deducing, Harrigan could draw only one minor conclusion: the shot had come from the vicinity of the bar. Mathewson smirked openly.

Marty eyed me quizzically, so I drew him

aside, ignoring Mathewson's scorching stare.

"Not yet," I begged. "Pull me in when someone tips you off about my run-in with Soloff. But first let me do a little snooping on my own."

"Okay," Harrigan said. "The hired help would never dare squeal on Benny, so I'll let you ride until something else breaks. Or until Mathewson gets a bright idea."

"Mathewson is Vice Squad. Where does he fit in here?"

"He's got a brother in the D.A.'s office." Harrigan grinned wryly.

I studied Mathewson with new contempt. I had the stogie-chewing, slovenly ex-bartender figured for a heel, but a heel with guts. Until now I didn't know that his guts were invested in a brother uptown. Ambitious as all hell, he had been sticking his veined, bulbous nose into half the homicide investigations in town, alibing that the Vice Squad was interested in the profession of the corpses. Ethically he was wrong. But ethics, or the lack of them, rather, was the reason I had quit the force a year before.

I yawned theatrically and started to leave.

"I may have to call you," Harrigan warned.

"Fair enough," I said, starting for the door.

"Wait a minute, Roark!" Mathewson called from the stage, where he had been eyeing the corpse with almost indecent intensity. "Where do you think you're going?"

I waited until he had hopped paunchily off the stage and was in front of me. "To bed," I said.

"No, you ain't," he said, clutching my arm.

I knocked his hand away. "This is Harrigan's show, isn't it?"

He admitted grudgingly that it was.

"Well, Marty said I could leave. Why don't you go back to rolling stray skirts for their dough?" It was common knowledge that the Vice Squad collected graft by picking up stray girls out late at night and threatening them with thirty days if they couldn't produce ten bucks on the spot.

I turned on my heel and left The Casbah, feeling Mathewson's brittle stare playing up and down my spine like jagged fingernails.

IT was drizzling outside. King's Tavern, a combination gin mill and cafe, was next door, separated from the night club by a dark staircase crouching behind a glass-paneled door. I went into the tavern to get out of the rain.

Sitting at the bar, munching a salami sandwich and washing it down with Bock beer, I studied the flotsam around me.

Dozens of floaters and stew-bums wandered around in their alcoholic Valhallas, cadging drinks. A trio of showgirls, not too young nor too sober, sat in a booth nibbling lox sandwiches. A plainclothesman leaned wearily against the battered juke box near the door, his tired, bloodshot eyes flicking constantly. In a far corner, sitting with his back to me and absorbed in a racing form, was Big Benny Soloff.

That sold me short. Hoods don't stick around when the heat's on; they scatter. When the heat cools, they come back. If Benny was in on the murder next door he wouldn't be here now, so he seemed to eliminate himself as a suspect.

He must have sensed my stare. He swung around quickly and met my gaze with hostile frigidity. I grinned, embarrassed, and hefted my beer in salutation. He ignored the salute and returned to his turf sheet. A long, thin cigar smouldering in an ashtray on his table irritated him. He crushed it out impatiently.

Then the blonde came in. She couldn't have walked very far, for her tan swagger coat was dry except for a few fresh raindrops across the shoulders. She saw me, hesitated, then went to Benny's table.

She sat down and entered into animated conversation with Benny. From the way her eyes kept darting toward me I assumed I was the main topic.

"Good evening, Dan," a pleasant voice said.

I glanced over my shoulder. A slender young man with brown hair and clear gray eyes was standing beside me. He was deeply tanned and clean-shaven and smelled of cologne. He was just a bit too clean, too neat. He looked like he'd just come from a Finnish steam bath.

I COULDN'T place him and said so.

"I'm Victor," he explained. "The waiter who tipped you off about Soloff."

"Oh," I said, remembering.

"Before they released me, I heard the

cops mention you; the fat one on the Vice Squad especially."

I was interested. "Something I shouldn't know, no doubt?"

"One of the girls told him about your fight with Big Benny. He wants the other cop—Harrigan, isn't it?—to send out a general alarm for both of you."

That communiqué chilled me for a moment. Then I asked abruptly, "Where will the stairway between these buildings take me?"

Victor fumbled. "I—I don't know. Maybe to the spotlight booth. I'm not sure."

His fumble could be read several ways. Maybe he didn't know where the stairs went. Maybe he knew but was afraid to say. Maybe he knew but wasn't going to admit it, then changed his mind because he figured I'd find out anyway.

I liked the last maybe best.

I took off on another tangent. "Who was the frail who got plugged?"

He was waiting for that one. His light gray eyes didn't flicker as they stared at a bottle of rum on the shelf behind the bar. "I don't know," he said. "We just called her Choe." He downed the last of his drink and, as he tilted the glass upward, I became very much interested in his third finger, left hand.

He ducked out trying so hard to make his exit casual that the effort was obvious to me.

I sauntered up behind Big Benny Soloff. The blonde saw me coming and gave him the word. He was standing up when I reached him.

"Relax, Benny," I said. "I just want to pass along a little info."

He sneered. "So now you're doing me favors?"

"Not on a bet. But it'll do us both good if you blow town for a few days."

"What's the rub?" His tone was ugly but uncertain.

"The Law wants you bad."

"What's the ticket?"

"It's no raincheck, pal. It's murder!"

HE sat down, trying to be surprised, but he was no Spencer Tracy. "Yeah? Tell me more."

"Someone just bumped off Chloe, a stripper next door. The cops think you aimed at me and hit her. Maybe you need glasses. Anyway I want you to blow because if they

pick you up I'll be a material witness and I'd like to forego the publicity."

Benny got crafty. "First you snag my woman, then you give me a break. It don't read right."

The blonde snapped, "I never saw him before in my life, Benny! You've got him crossed with someone else."

Benny's piggish eyes narrowed to cloudy slits. "Yeah, I guess I could have crossed him with a lot of guys, couldn't I" he said. "But I was told it was him."

"Who told you?" I asked.

"That's no never mind."

"When the bulls start frisking the area, you won't be able to get away," I reminded him. "So beat it!"

He stood up, motioning to the blonde. "Let's go, baby."

She shook her head. "I'll stay here. They don't want me."

I thought he was going to slug her but he didn't. He stared at her for a second, one hand half raised, then said, "Okay, Marys. I ain't got time to argue." Then he pushed his way through the crowd, leaving a gaping aisle behind him. When the aisle closed he was gone.

I sat down, lit a cigarette and, cocking my head sideways to keep the smoke out of my eyes, asked, "Marys what?"

"Warshawsky," she said. "Or maybe O'Kelly. I don't remember."

"I don't give a rap who you string along with, Marys," I shrugged. "But you'd better get someone on your team in a hurry."

"How so?"

"The bulls want to talk to you too," I lied. "And once they get you uptown I'll bet they'll find enough to prod you up the river for a while."

She paled but kept her voice rough. "What pipe did you smoke that one out of?"

"You're a smart doll. Smart enough to know that your peroxide hair-do louses you up. A woman knocks her looks for only one reason—camouflage. Somewhere there's a warden waiting to welcome you home. Right?"

She was scared now. She stood up, buckled the belt to her swagger coat and picked up her purse. "I'm moving out," she said.

"Not without me," I said, rising.

"Why not?"

"Because a flatfoot will nab you before you get twenty yards. And," I added, "be-

cause I've got a rod in my pocket that will stop you before you get twenty feet."

"Where do we go?"

"Outside, turn left and through the door between these buildings."

AS WE shoved through the crowd, the detective leaning on the juke box gave us the once-over but let us go.

Just as we ducked into the dark doorway I heard Regan, Mathewson's stooge, ordering a squad of rookies to comb the neighborhood for Soloff and me.

The staircase was midnight black. As we felt our way upward, Marys had trouble with the steps because she was wearing theatrical pumps with super-high heels.

She by-passed a door at the head of the stairs, but I felt it and dragged her back. "In here!"

She pushed the door open and we entered. The room was as dark as a pawn-broker's heart but there were several rectangular pipings of light showing through the forward wall.

I nudged Marys ahead of me as we crossed the room. Once she moved slightly to the left and I went straight ahead. I stumbled over something hard but pliable on the floor.

The strips of light were coming through cracks at the edges of tin shutters covering the spotlight holes in the wall. I moved the shutters aside and the reflection of the club's house lights streamed in the booth. I glanced back to check what I'd stumbled over. Several yards of thick electrical cable lay coiled neatly in the center of the room.

The booth was empty except for two spot-lights pointing at the holes in the wall. One was a large, complicated affair to which was attached a multi-colored color wheel and the other was a small, baby spot with an amber lens. Over the baby spot a type-written message was pinned to the wall with a thumb tack. "Amber spot on Chloe's face for encore," it read. The paper was new, clean.

Marys was impatient. "What are we doing up here?"

"Looking for the spotlight man," I said. "Oh couldn't you guess?"

"I don't see him," she said.

I turned toward her and, as I turned, spotted something that I had overlooked. It wasn't much. Merely a small, closet door

cut in the wall and kalsomined over so nothing was evident except a faint outline and a small, glass knob.

I took my automatic from my pocket and pointed at Marys. "Back in that corner!" I ordered. "And stay there."

I didn't want to look in the closet because I knew what I'd find. I swung the door open. There was nothing inside but a pile of dusty canvas backdrops lying on the floor.

I tried to kick them aside but something solid underneath stopped my foot.

I knelt down and flipped the canvas back. The spotlight man was there all right. He had been sapped to death.

AS I started to rise I felt something coming at me like a breeze, where no breeze should be. I turned but not soon enough. Something caught me behind the ear and a brilliant white flash seared my eyeballs and I was out like a match in a blizzard.

When I came around, I wanted to go back to sleep. A split second before the blackjack hit me, an impression stamped itself on my mind and I wanted to get it back in focus before I awoke. It wasn't much. A taste maybe, or a sound. Perhaps even a scent. It lurked in a vague recess in my mind but, although I knew it was there, it wouldn't come out.

I heard Harrigan calling to me through a long, black vacuum, like a train at the other end of a tunnel.

"You're making it okay, Dan," he was saying. "Take it slow."

I took his advice and rested while he held a damp, cold handkerchief on my forehead. When I said I could make it, he helped me to my feet and, although I was nauseous, I managed to stay steady as long as I leaned against the wall.

I was still in the spotlight booth. Remembering the spot man I looked into the closet. He was still there. He was still dead.

"What time is it?" My voice sounded thick and strange.

"Four-thirty."

I had taken a long, long ride. When my nausea receded, I asked, "Where's Marys?"

"Marys? Marys who?"

"The blonde. Soloff's woman."

"Beats me," Harrigan shrugged. "Was she with you?"

"Yeah," I said bitterly. "She was with me, all right."

"Did she clock you?"

"I don't see how. She was over in that corner when I looked in the closet. She couldn't have moved that fast. That would have been impossible."

Then the elusive impression in my mind came to me. I went into the hallway, with Harrigan right behind me. His flashlight revealed what I had expected to find: footprints in the thick coating of dust on the floor, footprints originally made by wet shoes. Tonight's rain was the first we'd had in a month.

HARRIGAN followed through. "Some-
one was waiting and sapped you when
your back was to the door. But who?"

"It could have been Soloff," I said. "Be-
cause his girl friend had been up here be-
fore. When we came up here in the dark,
she side-stepped that coil of cable, so she
must have known it was there. Or it could
have been Victor—"

"Who's Victor?"

"The slim, dapper waiter you grilled in
the club."

"I didn't grill any dapper waiter named
Victor. The only waiters I saw were three
Filipinos," Marty said.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

I started for the door, gloating. "That's
our boy!"

Harrigan stopped me. "Don't go off half-
cocked, Dan, or you'll wind up in the
morgue."

"Not me."

"Yes, you. You weren't just put to
sleep, kid. Whoever laid the sap on you
meant to kill you. Feel it."

I fingered my head tenderly. It felt like
a washboard. The hair on the back of my
head was matted with dried blood. I grinned
sheepishly.

Standing there with his hair plastered
damply over his forehead and his hands
deep in his coat pockets, Harrigan looked
like something hung out on the line to dry.
"You're supposed to be dead, Dan," he said.
"So get set before you make another play.
You might not be so lucky next time."

"Let's take a look at Chloe's dressing-
room," I said.

"I've already done that."

"Let's do it again, anyway."

AS WE entered The Casbah, Harrigan assigned a man to guard the door to the spotlight room. The club was deserted except for the police guarding the exits. The corpse was gone from the strip ramp but a small smudge of blood marked where it had been.

Just as Harrigan reached for the brass knob on the dressing-room door, we heard a slight sound inside. It could have been a window being raised or lowered, or a leather heel scraping the floor, or a piece of furniture being shifted.

We flattened ourselves against the wall on either side of the door.

Harrigan drew his gun and handed me mine, which he must have found in the spot booth.

There was another small sound that we couldn't identify. We waited.

Then Mathewson's raucous, bawdy voice called from the lobby. "Harrigan!"

Marty cursed audibly, plunged through the door and got to the open window across the room just in time to take a couple of futile shots at a fleet shadow darting into the inky shadows of the alley outside.

The room had been ransacked. Drawers had been ripped from the dressing table and spilled on the floor, the clothes hamper had been emptied, bras and G-strings and gossamer veils were strewn over the floor. Even the girl's make-up kit had been overturned on the chaise lounge.

We were standing ruefully in the midst of the shambles when Mathewson arrived. He was surprised at the condition of the room but it didn't wipe the superior smirk from his face.

"I've got news for you two Junior G-men," he said, "if you'll take time off to hear it."

Harrigan was in a bad mood. "Spill it."

"You know that skirt that Roark was chasing when the stripper got killed?"

"Of course," Marty said.

"Sergeant Regan just found her."

Mathewson was holding something back, teasing us.

"Quit the clowning!" Harrigan rasped. "What's the pay-off?"

"She was lying in the gutter in the three hundred block on West Chestnut. The back of her head was blown off!"

The effect his news had on us must have gratified him no end.

"When did it happen?" Harrigan asked.

"Fifteen minutes ago. Regan got the radio report and went to investigate. He just radioed back to me." Mathewson turned to me. "By the way, they want you uptown. Let's go."

"He's in my custody," Harrigan said. Mathewson flushed, frustrated. "Okay. But it'll be rough on you if you can't produce him when you make your report."

"I'll worry about that," Harrigan said. Mathewson left.

Getting back to the thing on hand, Marty said, "Chestnut Street is thirty blocks away. Soloff has been missing for hours and his girl is dead. But if he's our man, who was in here?"

"Victor," I deducted. "He was in King's Tavern when he should have been onstage with the rest of the hired help. To boot, he heard everything that was being said when you and Mathewson were arguing in the club, so he must have been hiding inside, but in some place with an outside exit. That puts him in the spotlight booth."

"He couldn't have been in here and on Chestnut at the same time," Harrigan mused, then snapped his fingers excitedly. "But it could be reversed. He could have been on West Chestnut and Soloff could have been here!"

I was skeptical. "But where were they when Chloe was bumped off? I think we missed something in the spot booth. Let's take another check."

When we were back upstairs, I studied the holes in the wall intently. "The shot came from here, of course."

Harrigan grunted. "I knew that when I found you up here asleep."

"But Victor was waiting on tables downstairs at the time. And when I talked to Soloff in King's Tavern, he wasn't surprised about Chloe's murder but he was genuinely shocked to learn that the cops were after him for it. I'll bet on that," I said.

I READ the sheet on the wall and remembered Chloe's angry glances toward the spotlight booth. I tipped the baby spot over.

Harrigan squatted beside me, cowboy fashion, as I unlatched the hinged metal door and examined the spot's inner mechanism. I wanted to find a gun but didn't. The receptacle was clean except for a charred piece of string lying at the base of the bulb.

(Continued on page 74)

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MIX A STIFF ONE

(Continued from page 72)

"You're looking for a gun," Harrigan said without irony, "and it isn't there."

I started to close the metal door when I saw a faint glitter. Closer examination revealed two small holes bored, one ahead of the other, in the reflector base about six inches ahead of the bulb. "No, it isn't," I said. "But I sure found where it used to be!"

Harrigan's breath whistled through his teeth.

"The gun was planted in here on a metal frame," I explained. "It was focused in with the spotlight beam, a typewritten message was left for the spotlight man to aim the beam at Chloe's face, and the killer took off and established an alibi miles away."

HARRIGAN was skeptical. "What controlled the shot?"

I exhibited the charred string. "Spotlights get almost red hot. This string was wound around the base of the bulb and attached to the cocked trigger of the gun. When the string was burnt through, the gun went off. After his alibi was set and while you were busy downstairs, the killer sauntered up here, removed the gun and its frame, and took off. The gun, with a silencer attached, is probably lying at the bottom of the lake by now."

"If the spot man was dead," Harrigan asked, "who operated the spots?"

"He was killed after Chloe but before he could tell what he knew. So there must have been an accomplice, someone we wouldn't suspect, who removed the gun afterward, while the brains was establishing a perfect alibi." Harrigan nodded.

"Furthermore," I continued, "I don't think I was steered to that particular table down front by accident. I think Marys led me down there for the express purpose of starting a ruckus to make Benny Soloff the logical killer. Benny said someone tipped him off that I was on the make for his girl. That someone was in cahoots with Marys and that someone is the guy we want!"

"I'm going after Victor," Harrigan said, starting for the door. "Coming with me?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'll wait here until Mathewson's stooges relax. Let me know when they do."

As soon as the door closed behind Marty, I unrolled the coil of cable, tied one end to the large spotlight and dropped the other end out one of the projection holes. Then I climbed out and slid down to the floor of The Casbah. Tarzan stuff.

Luckily, the guards had been stationed outside the exits, so no one saw me as I crept down the aisle and backstage to Chloe's room.

ONCE inside, I wondered what I was doing there. All I was sure of was that there was something in the room that someone wanted badly and I was certain he had been scared off by Mathewson's shout before he found it.

The rays from a distant street light filtered dimly through the window but they didn't help much. I groped through the dark, cursing softly as I stumbled over upset furniture and almost dived headlong into the clothes closet.

That was as good a start as any. I felt several pairs of dancing slippers on the floor, worked up through the pockets of the tailored ensembles on the rack and, above them, brushed lightly over the hat shelf. Almost immediately my fingers touched a small, sequined handbag that had been tossed carelessly behind a cylindrical hatbox.

It was a dainty thing, covered with plastic scales and, I suspected, loaded with dynamite. I emptied its contents on the window sill to examine them by the pale gleam of the street light. Eighty-one cents in silver, a five-dollar bill, two keys and a transparent celluloid envelope containing a driver's license issued to one Mrs. Victor L. Mace.

That was it; that was what someone had come here for. I started to pocket the document when a faint sound froze me. I didn't move. The hair bristled on the nape of my neck and I stared down at my hands splayed out before me and thought of how very far away the gun in my pocket was.

"Don't make a break," a pleasant voice warned. "Stay as sweet as you are."

"It's your fall, Victor," I said.

A gun prodded my spine as his hand reached around and relieved me of the license.

"When did you start working on this angle, Dan?" he asked.

"When I talked to you in King's Tavern and noticed the white band of flesh on your ring finger," I said. "That'll teach you to get a suntan with your wedding ring on."

Victor was quiet for some time but the pressure of the gun was steady. Finally he said, "Would it do any good to say I didn't kill my wife?"

"Not much."

"Chloe was a wonderful person, Dan; too good for me. She danced like that to make both ends meet, not because she wanted to. Me, I'm a two-time loser. With that record against me, plus your deductions, I won't stand a chance."

I agreed with him. "But your story doesn't ride level," I said. "Chloe didn't have to strip to get by. You waiters make goodly cabbage."

"So do blackmailers," he said. His tone was almost apologetic and I couldn't feel the gun any more.

I knew he was going to kill me. If I lived he would go to the chair, innocent or guilty, and if he shot me and got caught, they could only electrocute him once anyway. He was pensive now, off his guard, and this was probably the only chance I'd ever have.

I SPUN around, throwing myself sideways and knocking his gun upward just as a roar deafened me and a slug burnt my ribs.

I clutched his gun hand high on the wrist, and kept the gun pointed ceiling-ward while I closed in, hugged his waist and forced him back.

We rolled along the wall silently. His breath came in short gasps as he hammered the nape of my neck with his free hand. Then he lurched backward and fell against the dressing table. I bent him back and the cords along my throat swelled and pulsed with the strain as I inched his gun hand back and pounded the automatic against the mirror. The mirror shattered, leaving ugly spines of heavy glass clinging to the frame.

I raked the back of his hand against

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the jagged glass, cutting it wide open. The automatic fell, bounced off the table and skidded across the floor. His blood coursed down over my hand.

While we were locked there my hand, the one holding his waist, brushed against something round and heavy, a jar of theatrical cleansing cream. I grabbed it, stepped back for leverage, throwing him off balance, and whipped the jar against his temple.

The jar didn't break but Victor did. He went down with a regretful sigh.

I was standing over him, breathing heavily and wiping the blood off my arm, when the Law breezed in.

Harrigan was in the lead, followed of course by Mathewson.

"It took you long enough," I panted. "He shot at me three minutes ago."

"We couldn't tell where the shot came from," Marty apologized. "The acoustics in the dump covered it."

"It's a moot point now," I said. "There's what you were looking for." I nodded at Victor, who was beginning to stir.

Mathewson said brightly, "I'll take him uptown."

Harrigan said, "Okay. But keep the report honest."

Mathewson and his buddy, Regan, hauled Victor to his feet. He lurched a little but was coming out of it all right.

I did something that must have seemed insane to the bluecoats. I extended a package of cigarettes to Victor. "Have a cigarette, Victor," I said.

He took one. "Thanks, Dan," he said. "Thanks a lot."

I lit it for him and Mathewson and Regan jerked him out more roughly than necessary.

WHEN they were gone, Harrigan and I relaxed on the chaise lounge, lit cigarettes and tore up the case.

"He's a two-time loser," I mused. "He was being blackmailed but I don't know for what."

Harrigan said, "Maybe because someone knew enough about him to hand him another rap and send him up the river for life."

I stood up quickly. "You've got it, Marty. Chloe was Victor's wife—"

"What?"

"That's right. He was being blackmailed and she threatened to expose the black-

mailer. So she was killed to keep her from talking!"

"Providing, of course," Marty said drily, "Victor didn't kill her, himself, for some other reason."

I grinned triumphantly. "A second before I was sapped upstairs, a clue was imbedded in my mind: the scent of cigar smoke clinging to woolen clothes. Just now I offered Victor a cigarette and he took it, from habit. A cigar smoker wouldn't have cared for a cigarette if he was as groggy as Victor."

Marty was unconvinced. "You're weaving a crazy web."

"Trace everything back," I said then; but before he could trace anything, I stopped him cold.

Stunned for a second, I finally got out what I wanted to say. "Stop that squad car, Marty! Stop it before it gets too far, and pray that Victor is still breathing!"

My panic alerted Harrigan. He ran to the door and shouted to a harness bull outside to send out a general alarm to intercept and hold on the spot City Squad Car No. 66.

We went outside and stood under the club's canvas canopy while waiting for an answer to the radioed alarm. It was drizzling again. The raindrops were so gentle that they hardly splattered when they hit the street. Honky-tonk music with the solid beat of jazz drum predominating, drifted from King's Tavern. A streetcar snarled past, its occupants staring out at us with blank, cardboard expressions.

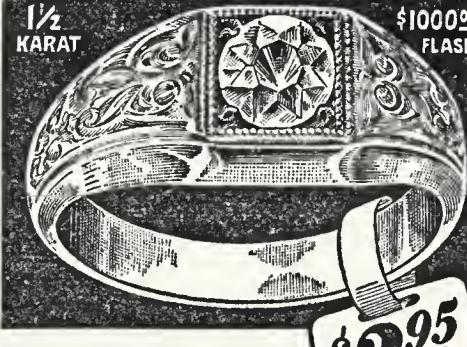
A cop was sitting in Harrigan's squad car parked at the curb, fiddling with the radio but not getting much more than static. Then a voice came through. We hurried over to catch the message.

"State Patrolmen, attention! Patrolman injured critically at viaduct seven miles north of St. Johns! Halt City Squad Car 66 responsible for accident! Repeat—"

Harrigan shoved the bluecoat under the wheel, pushed me into the back seat and ordered, "Get out there! Get out there fast!"

THE driver knew his business. We cut through town like it had never done before, whipping around corners on two wheels, darting around trucks and streetcars, lurching and careening against safety zones in the center of the streets. Once, when we ran through a red light, a cross-

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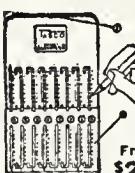
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country bus loomed up before us, the hugest bus ever built. I ducked my head in my arms to cushion the shock that never came. We skidded on the slick pavement for thirty yards, ricochetted off a curbing, tore a fender against a lamp post and kept going.

Siren screaming, we turned onto Route 133 and sped through suburban Oakville, and suddenly we were out in the country with the smell of clover around us and the lights of St. Johns glowing against the clouds on the horizon ahead.

We coasted up to the viaduct, forewarned by the cars lined up along the right-of-way.

The viaduct was more of a tunnel, long and dank and built into a hill under the railroad right-of-way. It was brightly lighted by auto headlights.

We forced our way through the crowd that had gathered. A motorcycle, hardly recognizable, was plastered against a huge concrete block at the entrance. A few feet away lay a smashed, bloody State patrolman. Someone had worked a heavy overcoat under him to protect him from the wet pavement and someone else had flung an expensive fur chubby over him.

He was trying to say something. "He cut in on me," he whispered, retching blood. "He cut in but I got him!"

Harrigan asked, "You got him?"

The patrolman wasn't listening. He lay there, repeating the phrase over and over. By the time the ambulance arrived, he was dead.

THE three of us, the driver and Marty and I, returned to the car and drove through the viaduct.

Harrigan finally broke the silence. "How did you know it was Mathewson, Dan?"

"The smell of cigar smoke was the first break," I said. "Then, when he said Regan had gotten the report that Marys was dead and had gone to investigate, he tied his own noose. The cop doesn't live who can go thirty blocks, investigate a murder and radio back a report in fifteen. So Regan had to be there when Marys was killed, which points to him as her killer. He was also the stooge, probably, who slugged the spot man into the Hereafter."

"Go on," Harrigan said.

"That evidence won't convict a man but when Mathewson was on his way to rubbing Victor out 'while attempting to es-

cape,' he got the radio alarm to stop his squad car and he knew his race was run, so he tried to get out of town. I only hope we catch up with him before he kills Victor!"

We were about four miles from the viaduct now.

The driver suggested turning back but Harrigan told him to go into St. Johns. A mile further we rounded a curve and a few hundred feet above saw a car lying on its side in the ditch. There was a small hole through the rear window and a corpse inside. It was Regan. There was a bullet hole in his back. Evidently he had died at the wheel.

On the side of the road was a small but dense picnic grove. On the other was a pasture with a huge woods beyond.

"You and the driver take the big one," I suggested. "I'll cover the close one."

They drew their Police Specials and started across the pasture. I headed for the grove.

The dawn breaking on the horizon was reflected on the four-foot high mist that floated among the trees.

Just as I reached the grove I heard someone beating through the underbrush toward me. I drew my automatic, hid behind a tree and waited.

It was Victor. He was panting and stumbling and his hair was matted with dirt and dew. There was an open gash across his cheek and he limped as though he'd wrenched an ankle.

I stepped out from behind the tree and stopped him. He wasn't surprised to see me; he was beyond that.

"When you stopped on the road, he tried to kill me," he said hoarsely. He reached for my gun. "Give it to me, Dan. This is my business. Mine and Chloe's."

He was right. I handed him my gun, butt foremost. He turned back into the grove, a shadowy figure lurching among the trees. Soon the mist closed in and enveloped him.

It wasn't long before I heard two shots, heavy, dull roars of a police .38. Then, a moment later, the high, snapping echo of my .32. I waited until Victor returned and gave me back my gun.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get out of here."

We walked toward the car without speaking. Harrigan had heard the shots and was coming across the pasture. He waved and I waved back.

Victor waved, too.

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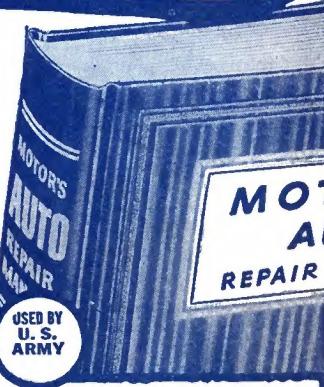
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